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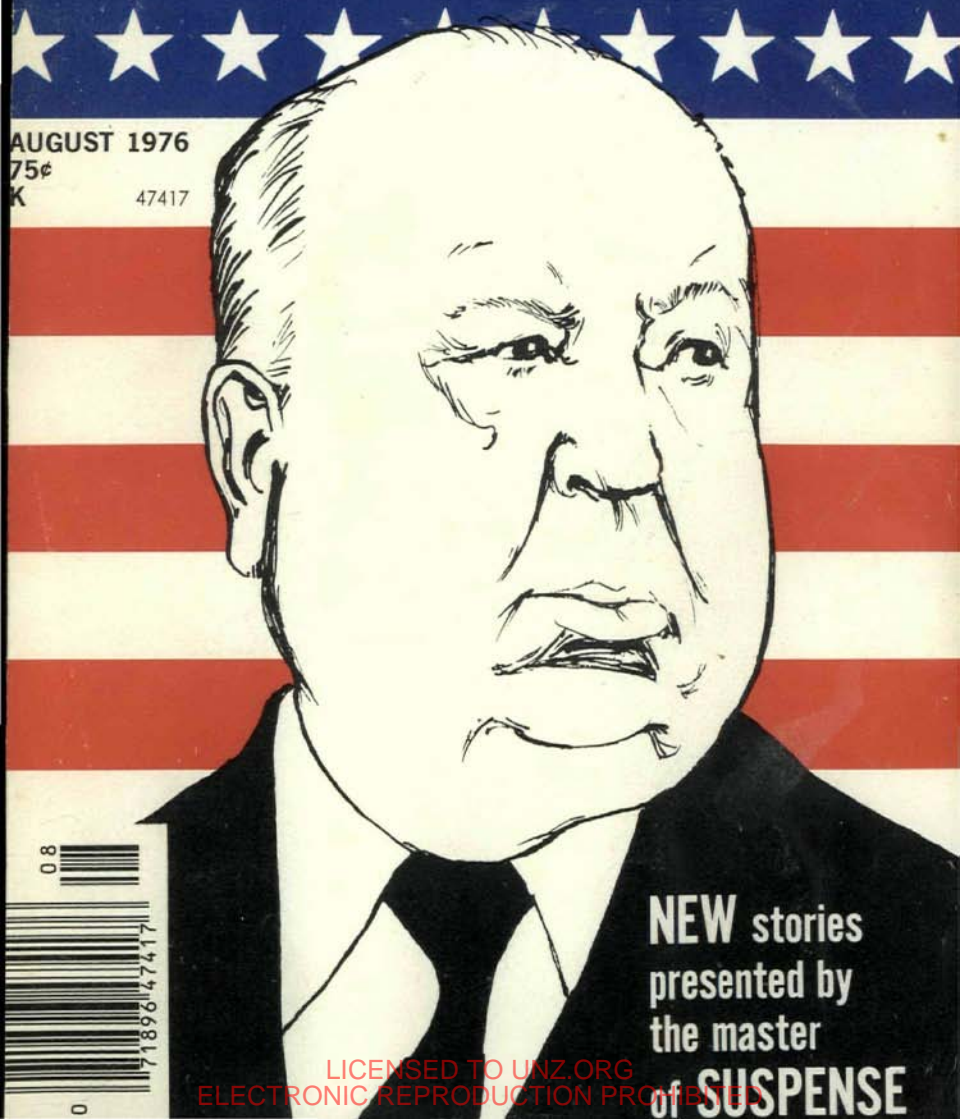
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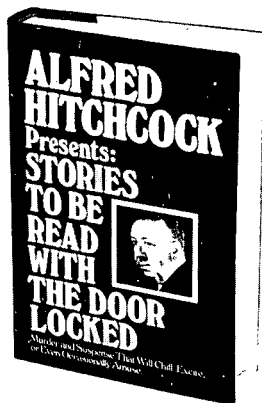
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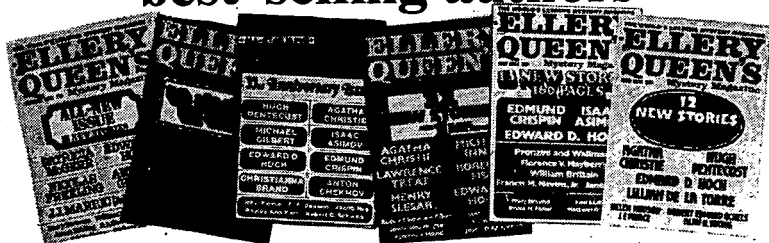
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August 1976

Dear Reader:

I imagine you've noticed that it's bicentennial year in the U.S.A.—and this being our August issue, which goes on sale in July, we consider it our bicentennial issue. And another worthy cause for celebration, each of the stories containing its own special kind of dynamite.

Beginning with S. S. Rafferty's colonial detective story, "The South Carolina Cicisbeos" ("cicisbeos" being the word from which "sissy boys" was derived), you'll find much that is colorful and contrastful—blood red, pale white, and denim blue (see "A Pair of Recycled Jeans" by Lawrence Block), with fireworks to spare (see "Plastique" by Edward D. Hoch).

May you find ample time from your Fourth of July frolics to enjoy them.

Good reading.

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The Italians dreamed it up, and Don Juan would have loved it; Wellman Oaks did not . . .

THE SOUTH CAROLINA CICIS BEOS

by
S.S.
RAFFERTY



It was one of those warm, butter-turning days that pop up now and again in early May to remind humankind that the heat of summer is not far off. I normally would have enjoyed this prelude to the balmy season of 1758 had we not been visiting in Charles Town in the South Carolina colony. Visiting is perhaps an improper word; we were languishing. Or Cork was. I, as his financial yeoman, was busy caring for his many business interests which are scattered about the colonies.

This gay and bountiful port holds a fascination for my employer, Captain Jeremy Cork, and this sudden burst of early summer filled me with dread. Not that Cork would pass an aestival here once the temperature rose into the 80's and the dank humidity descended. No, the peril lay in the possibility that he would be coaxed into joining the local gentry in its annual exodus to New Port, Rhode Island, where the merriment would continue in cooler climes. Once in that company, I would not be able to get him to pay attention to business until October.

Charles Town's heady atmosphere stems from the quick and easy fortunes that have been made in the rice and indigo trades. Nobody in the town seems to be poor, and quite honestly no one seems to give a damn if school keeps or not. Captain Cork is suited to the place like a hand to the glove. Balls, fairs, banquets and outings are the main preoccupation of the quality, and even the humbler classes display a wont for a good time. It was imperative that I get Cork out of this Sodom-by-the-Sea.

Of course, when we are in Charles Town it is mandatory that we stay at the Halcyon Club, where Cork is a charter member. It is a sumptuous mansion which serves as the hub, if not the inventor, of much of the town's social hi-jinks.

I was pondering the profit and loss situation of his talc mill in Pennsylvania when he emerged from his bedchamber, ducking as usual to get his six-foot-six frame through the doorway. It was close to eleven in the forenoon, yet he was fully dressed and was carrying those dratted sticks again.

"Up with the birds, I see," I chided him, "and off to your chores without breakfast."

"I ate before retiring," he snapped, "and there is more work in this than you realize."

"I know; I know," I said. "Doctor Rush says it will add ten years to your life, but I don't think he meant that you should spend your entire life playing at it."

His latest passion is a game called golf. It is a puerile pastime wherein grown men knock a feather-filled leather ball about an open common in the laughable effort to hit it into a series of holes in the ground.

"I wouldn't call a few hours in the fresh air and sunshine an entire

life. Besides, it relaxes me."

"Relaxes you for what? The strain of gallivanting from party to party? Or perhaps it helps clear your mind for your poker game."

Poker is a vice which is practised between midnight and dawn. A requisite to the ritual is seegar smoke and brandy fumes.

"Oaks," he grunted, "you are an abomination."

"That may be so, sir, but so is the talc mill. It lost almost 50 pounds last quarter."

"Hal" he guffawed at me, taking a practise swing with his golf stick. "I made that and more at the tables last night. Confound it, you're worse than a wife."

"A wife would have left you years ago. A woman wouldn't have you about."

He knocked his imaginary ball with the stick, and, by jing, stood there following its flight. "Perfect," he said with self-satisfaction. "Speaking of wives, we will both have one this week. The cicisbeos drawing is tonight."

"Must I get involved in that nonsense?"

"Of course. It would be an insult to the fair ladies of this town not to. Well, I'm off." He strode to the door and was gone.

"Take deep breaths," I called after him. "Stretch those muscles. There's a long night ahead, and you must be relaxed."

I heard his descent on the hallway stairs and shook my head in despair. I almost wished for a note from Major Tell, asking us to hurry to Philadelphia or Boston to investigate some social puzzle, as Cork calls them. Actually, the puzzles are the detection of criminals in all manner of mayhem and skulduggery. That I, Wellman Oaks, who normally abhors that activity, would hope for a case to occur indicates the depth of my concern. This cicisbeos nonsense would keep us in Charles Town another week, and invitations to New Port were dangerously close.

Actually, I had forgotten all about Cicisbeos Week, and now I was informed that I would have to participate. It is one of the customs at the Halcyon Club to place all the married ladies' names in a bowl, and have each member draw from it. For one entire week, you are the lady's cicisbeo, her recognized *cavalier servante* and her escort to various functions. The thought of catering to a lady in the presence of her husband seems a bit loaded to me, but the locals enjoy it no end. All that is, except the unmarried ladies, who are excluded from the cus-

tom. Once selected, you become the lady's property, and you must pay court to her every whim, call her "cara mia" and wear her ribbon on your belt like a branded steer. I have nothing against doting on a lady, mind you, but with my luck, I felt sure to draw a cranky old crone who would have me scurrying about for bonbons and sweetmeats to fill her ugly face.

Happily my fears proved unfounded, for that evening I had the good fortune to draw the name of Mrs. Margaret Fishingale, a young damsel and as pretty a piece of frippery as you will ever see. Called Peggy by her friends, she was the wife of Hal Fishingale, the scion of the Fishingale Plantation. They had been married but a few months, and I could see that her spouse was not overjoyed at the thought of having a squire around her for a week. But Cara Mia Margaret (I kept it as formal as possible and refrained from calling her Peggy in deference to her husband's feelings) seemed to enjoy the situation.

Cork was not as fortunate. He was paired with Mrs. India Rygate, the wife of a powerful shipping tsar, Alonzo Rygate. Mrs. Rygate was the grande dame of Charles Town's society, and well into her sixties. Cork was unfazed, however, for he has a remarkable ability to make the best of any situation. As he says, "Enough is as good as a feast."

And so our servitude began in earnest the next day, when we were invited (or ordered, to be more accurate) to a luncheon at the Rygate townhouse.

Joining us at the affair was Peter Goselowe, the importer, who squired Mrs. Sue Ann Hammond, an attractive woman in her thirties, whose husband Matt seemed quite content to be rid of her for a week. All the husbands were there to present their wives to us and then withdraw, leaving the gallants to their tasks. Margaret Fishingale introduced me to two other ladies, who had to be the pride of the South. Mrs. Jessie Barstow was a comely thing, blonde, half woman, half child, who bubbled with excitement. The other was Dicey Darby, no more than eighteen, with coal black hair and alabaster skin. She could be described only as stunning.

I found myself feeling sorry for Jessie Barstow, for her cicisbeo was almost twice her age and portly. Then, to my surprise, he was introduced as her husband, Trevor Barstow. Dicey's husband was John Darby, a young man with extensive frontier holdings and a reputation as an indian fighter.

"It seems that we have been abandoned," Jessie said to Dicey.

"Dahlin', Cole and Clay have been late for everything since they were children."

Jessie tossed her pretty head back and laughed. "It's Clay that was the first to be late, remember." She turned to me and explained. "The Severy brothers are twins, Mr. Oaks. Cole is my gallant and Clay is Jessie's. Cole was born two minutes before Clay, and Clay says he had the right to be late from then on."

Just then there was some noise in the center hall, and two young men appeared in the doorway. They looked like a brace of matched thoroughbreds, black-haired, dark-eyed and fiercely handsome. The birth of twins is not uncommon, but their chance survival made them a rare sight. The two ladies rushed to greet them.

We were quite a merry group, and Cork made Apple Knock for everyone. We toasted our carmas and then Mrs. Rygate announced that it was time for the presentation of the tokens of honor and all the gallants lined up in a row. Every wife went to her husband, and Mrs. Rygate gave the signal to begin. It was all very ceremonial.

Mrs. Rygate was presented to Cork by her husband, and she then tied a bright red scarf to Cork's belt and said, "Wear my colors with honor, sir." Cork took her arm and led her to the other side of the room. I was next in line, and Hal Fishingale presented Margaret to me. She gave me a white scarf, saying with a smile, "For the innocence of our relationship." Her husband looked glum as I took her arm and rejoined Cork.

The next husband and wife were Jessie and Trevor Barstow. As he presented her to Cole Severy, she, to my surprise, did not present him with a scarf, but ashamedly slipped a blue garter on his arm. "Now you take care of that, Cole," she admonished him mockingly. "That's from my wedding trousseau, my 'something blue'."

"Oh, no," Margaret Fishingale murmured from my side.

"Madam?"

"I knew she'd do something like this," she whispered to me. "Jessie chased Cole for years, and couldn't get him to the altar. She's just trying to embarrass him."

"Her husband looks like the embarrassed one," I said. Trevor Barstow was blushing.

"More like bullet-biting angry, Mr. Oaks. Trevor knows Jessie mar-

ried him for his money, but he adores her in spite of her antics. Now watch, Dicey Darby won't be outdone."

And sure enough, she wasn't. When she was presented to Clay Severy, she turned her back to us and lifted her skirts, turning back again with a blue polka-dot garter in her hand. This was turning into an orgy, and I was uncomfortable.

Dicey slipped the garter on Clay's arm and said, "Now we can tell you handsome boys apart."

Sue Ann Hammond broke the tension in the room when she gave Peter Goselowe a bright green scarf and told him it was for spring.

Thus we were joined to our ladies and flung into a round of parties, picnics, dances and all manner of jollity. By the third day, I was a bit winded, but the ladies were going strong. Although there were forty-two couples in all, our original group at Mrs. Rygate's tended to stick together. No one was having more fun than Jessie Barstow.

We were all at dinner at the Halcyon Club on the fourth evening when Jessie brought up the tournament idea.

"I don't play golf," I told her when she suggested that the gallants play a game the next day for a purse of 250 pounds. Each of the five cavaliers was to put up 50 pounds, and the winner was to fete the whole group to a sumptuous dinner on the final evening of Cicisbeos Week.

"Then you will have to learn, Mr. Oaks," Jessie scolded me. "The knights of old held tournaments too, and golf is certainly safer than jousting."

I couldn't quite see the logic in that statement, but it was useless to argue with a beautiful headstrong woman. Besides, Cork, Clay, Cole and Peter Goselowe were all for it, and the match was set to begin at ten o'clock the following morning, with all the ladies in attendance.

The Severy brothers were staying at the Club, and Cork joined them for poker after the ladies had been taken to their homes. I went to our rooms to brood. After all, 50 pounds is a great deal of money.

When Cork came in, I was sitting at the desk with my personal ledger.

"If you lose," he said, "take it out of the general funds. After all, I got you into this."

"No, sir, I cannot accept the offer. It's a question of honor."

He gave me that smirk-a-mouth of his. "Well, it's only a matter of

batting a little ball around. You said so yourself."

"I didn't know you made wagers on it."

"Oaks, betting in golf is like sex in marriage. Without it, things get dull."

He is truly a heathen. "That's a rather hedonistic way to put it. In a sense, I have been married all week without romance, and it's quite enjoyable. Although I am surprised at the brazenness of Jessie and Dicey. Jessie is practically throwing herself at Cole Severy."

"He's quite a rogue with the ladies, but I hear he is smart enough to avoid complications with a married woman."

I finished my calculations in the ledger and saw that the loss of 50 pounds from my personal account would almost make a pauper of me. "Are all those fellows, Clay, Cole and Peter Goselowe, competent golfers?"

"Excellent, I would say."

"I was thinking. Tomorrow morning could we rise early and go out to the Common? Perhaps you could give me some instructions."

"If you like. Wake me early."

I did, but when we had breakfasted and went outside at 8 A.M., there was a light ground-fog under the morning sun. Cork assured me that it would burn itself off before we got to the Common, which was a ten-minute walk out of the town. But there still was some fog when we arrived and the grass was quite dewy. I was surprised at the size of the course. It was a large open field, some 200 yards in depth. At various places large poles protruded from the ground to mark the location of the holes.

Cork showed me how to hold the club and how to swing it. After a few practice shots I put down the ball and took a swing, sending the missile up into the air in a wide arc.

"Was that good?" I asked.

"As they say in this game, you're in the rough. The ball is in the woods to the left. Come on, let's find it." We entered under the trees and started our search. I was about ten feet from Cork when I saw it. "Captain!" I cried. "Come over here! This is terrible!"

He came on the run and looked down at the body that was stretched out on the ground.

"It's Clay Severy," I said, kneeling down by the corpse. There was a gaping stab-wound in his chest and his face was cold and white. On his

arm was the polka-dot garter that Dicey Darby had given him, and I wondered if it could possibly have been the motive for his death. I looked up at Cork, who was staring down at the man's face.

"Could he have run afoul of Dicey's husband?"

"There are many possibilities, but the first problem is which brother this is."

"Why, it's Clay. See the polka-dot garter?"

"Yes, but his face tells me it's Cole."

"Cole! But they are identical twins. How could you tell?"

"I have been in their company for four days, and to identify them in my mind I determined that Cole is the right-hand brother and Clay is the left-hand brother."

"Left-handed? I don't see . . ."

"Not *handed*, Oaks. Twins share a common face; they come from a common seed. But if you put them together, side by side, and merge their faces in your mind, one is the right side of the face and the other the left. Nothing in nature is exactly the same. I may be wrong, but we will see."

Cork remained with the body while I summoned the magistrate in town. His name was Horace Binsbee, an elderly gentleman of great girth who did not enjoy having his breakfast interrupted. He grudgingly called for his carriage and ate a meat pie on the way to the Common.

"Well, it's most fortunate you are in our town, Captain Cork," Binsbee said after viewing the death scene. "Some brigand must have waylaid him when he came to play golf."

"I doubt that, Judge Binsbee," Cork retorted. "His purse is still on him. And he couldn't have been playing golf in the fog. I believe he came here to meet someone. Let's take care of the corpse and then deal with the living."

We took the body back to town and left it with a coffin maker before going back to the Halcyon Club. On our way up to the Severy rooms, Cork warned us to keep quiet and to let him handle the situation.

He knocked at the door, and it opened in seconds. The twin was still in his nightshirt.

"Good morning, Captain." He yawned. "What has raised you so early?"

"Bad news, I'm afraid. Your brother is dead."

"Cole? Cole dead?" His eyes went wide with shock. "How? Where?"

So Cork had been right. We were looking at Clay Severy, and it was Cole who had been stabbed to death. Cork told him of the circumstances and the young man's jaw became rigid. "Damn that Jessie Barstow!" he growled. "I was afraid of this. Trevor Barstow is no man to trifle with."

"There is one complication. The killer thought it was you, Clay. Cole was wearing the polka-dot garter that Dicey Darby gave you."

There was a noise outside the open chamber door, and a woman rushed in with tears running down her face. She screamed in a French-accented voice, "Cole, oh Cole! Clay is dead! I've been such a fool, Cole. It was Clay I loved, and now it's too late."

The twin put his hands on her shoulders to calm her.

"Annette, calm yourself, I'm . . ."

"I was a fool," she ranted. "*Mon Dieu*, Cole, what am I going to do?"

"Annette, I *am* Clay, it's Cole who is dead."

She looked at him and went silent. The blood drained from her face and she swooned to the floor. Cork scooped her up in his arms and placed her on the couch. Clay brought brandy. As she came to, Clay explained.

"This is Mademoiselle de Arbois, gentlemen. She is my brother's ah . . . lady friend."

"She sounds French," I said.

"She is. She is a coiffeuse, poor thing, forced to dress hair for a living. She was once at the French Court." He brushed her hair back from her face and soothed her once her eyes were open. "I'm sorry, Annette, Cole seems to have worn my jacket by mistake. It is I who should be dead."

"I think not, Clay." We all turned to Cork, who had gone unnoticed into the bedchamber and come back holding a jacket in his hands. There was a polka-dot garter around the sleeve. "Either your brother had a garter to match yours and wore it there to trick someone or . . ."

"Whom would he try to trick?"

"I don't know, but it cost him his life. Do you have any enemies?"

Cole shrugged and Annette de Arbois spoke for him.

"Clay has no enemies, but Cole did. It was that *sorciere*. She couldn't have him so she killed him."

"Annette, you must not speak that way. Jessie wouldn't harm Cole."

"Clay, you are so kind and so foolish. I know women better than you. It's all over town that she was throwing herself at his head this week. Remember, I do the ladies' hair. I get all the gossip. Even her best friend, Dicey, thinks she is acting shamelessly. She told me so last night when I did her hair for your dinner party. Everyone knows she always wanted Cole. Oh, Clay, it's horrible to say, but I thought it was Cole and not you!"

"Perhaps we should leave these two to their grief," Cork suggested to the judge and myself.

When we were outside the room and the door closed behind us, I said, "It looks more like Trevor Barstow is under suspicion and not his wife."

"Except that Cole was wearing Clay's garter. A woman in love would know the difference between the two, but not an angry husband. Trevor Barstow was present when the garters were given to the brothers. If Cole were wearing a polka-dot garter, Barstow would have mistaken him for Clay. Well, Judge, we have work to do. I would appreciate your following up on some details."

"Of course, delighted, but lunch will be on us soon."

"Eat here at the Club as my guest, by all means, and while you are at it you might question the staff about Cole's departure this morning."

We left the judge to his task and I dutifully followed Cork downstairs to the street.

"Do you actually think Clay may have killed his brother?"

"What's so strange? The first murder in creation was between brothers."

"But they seemed on the best of terms all week. What possible motive could he have?"

"Any number of them. They obviously share an estate, and from the tenderness displayed by Clay toward Mlle. de Arbois, I would say he thinks highly of her."

"So we have three suspects—Jessie Barstow, Trevor Barstow and now Clay himself. Most confusing."

"It's even more tangled," Cork said as we walked along. "Consider that the murderer might have thought he was killing Clay. Does that bring Dicey Darby's husband into the picture? She's been quite kitenish with Clay all week."

"My word," I exclaimed, "and why not toss in Dicey herself? She might have been in love with Clay. It's all beyond me."

"Ah yes," he sighed, "on the face of it, it should be a simple hornbook exercise, and yet its answer lies hidden in subtle colors and damnable complexities—little squiggles and twists that confound the mind like a bashful bride in a maelstrom of honeymoon quilts. But have faith, old son, a well wrought challenge is but a cold night to make a man keen for conquest."

"Where are we walking to?" I asked.

"We need some background information. We must know our players more fully, their passions and strengths. When you are looking into a town's musty closets, your best source is an old woman, Oaks."

"Madam Rygate."

"Most astute, Oaks, most astute." He was smirking when he said it.

Madam India Rygate was at her morning coffee when we were shown into her sitting room. The grande dame poured cups for us. Cork was right about her abilities at gossip. She had not yet set foot outside the house, but she had all the details of the tragedy.

"It's disgraceful," she said, handing me the cup. "Brigands coming in from the back country to rob and kill. It is truly getting out of hand. My husband and some of the others are thinking of forming a group called the Regulators to bring law and order to the hinterland."

Internally, I was chuckling. It seemed to me that if the leaders of society had spent more time on good government instead of gay frolics, they wouldn't have had the brigand problem in the first place. Cork was digging his mental spade into the town's dirt pile.

"Tell me, Madam," he asked offhandedly, "you have known the Severy twins for a long time. Can you tell them apart?"

"I've known them since birth. Certainly I can distinguish between them. They are as different as night and day."

"How so?"

"In demeanor. Clay is the serious one, always was. Cole was quite a hellion as a child and a womanizer when he grew up. After their father died, Clay's steady hand kept their plantations going. Cole would have gambled them away. Jessie Barstow, she was Jessie Stone then, didn't know how lucky she was when Cole threw her over."

"For this French woman—Mlle. de Arbois?"

She looked aghast. "Heavens no, Captain Cork! That courtesan? Not

Cole Savery. Oh, I heard the talk. But when Cole settles down . . . oh dear, I mean if he had *lived* to settle down, I can assure you it would have been a woman of quality. In fact, there is a lovely widow in Taylorville not too much older than he who would have made him a good wife. Quite wealthy."

"Yes, I am sure you are quite the matchmaker."

Her face beamed. "Well, I matched Jessie to Trevor Barstow and then, after Cole had his fling with Dicey, I was lucky to get John Darby interested in her. Of course, Dicey has her own money, where Jessie did not, so her dowry was considerable."

"Then Cole threw Jessie over for Dicey?"

"Oh, yes. Not thrown over, really. Cole was very fickle. You probably noticed how Jessie and Dicey compete for attention. Take this nonsense with the garters. It was quite naughty of them."

"I thought they were the best of friends," I said.

"My dear Mr. Oaks." She wiggled a finger at me. "You bachelors are easily fooled by womankind. Those two are playing a cat's game in public. In private, they detest each other. Why, they've never even visited each other's homes."

"Tell me about the husbands, Madam. Are they the type to be jealous?"

She pursed her lips in thought. "John Darby is a man of action, as are all men from the frontier. A rough, quick, no-nonsense fellow. Trevor Barstow, on the other hand, is a moody type, steady, not much of a talker. I have to admit that Jessie has put some snap into him, and he revels in it."

"A while back you referred to Mlle. de Arbois as a courtesan. Were you speaking pejoratively?"

Her expression was pained. "I live and let live, Captain, but she's a little too Continental for my tastes. Maybe it's all an act, and she's merely a *grisette* put to raise her station. I believe she had her hooks into Clay Severy until his brother came back from Savannah two months ago. It was just as well. Cole could handle a woman like that without getting entangled. Not that I have any animosity toward her, mind you. She comes here to do my hair. I am not a snob, gentlemen. Live and let live, as I said."

"A good philosophy," Cork said with feeling. "One other point. Did Cole have anything to do with Mr. Oaks' *cara mia*, Peggy Fishingale?"

"No. Peg is a bit of a gossip, you know, but she and Hal have been sweethearts since childhood."

"And Mrs. Hammond, Mr. Goselowe's escort?"

"No. They are woodsy people, and new to our circle. I don't think Cole ever met them. But Peter Goselowe was once one of Cole's best friends. His lawyer, in fact."

"They had a falling out?"

"Yes. Some business dealing or other. You know how silly men can be over a contract. Clay settled the matter somehow but Peter and Cole have been cool to each other of late."

We had finished our coffee and our hostess offered more. Cork refused, and I took his lead.

"This has been most enjoyable, Madam," Cork said, bowing.

"I was charmed to have you both and pleased to have you as my cicisbeo, Captain. Perhaps next year we won't have any difficulties. This killing has certainly ruined the entire season. You really don't believe that Cole was killed by a brigand, do you?"

"No, Madam, nor do you. Any guesses?"

"Live and let live," she said with a smile.

Back on the street again, we were headed back to the Halcyon Club.

"The old cat certainly knows every nook and cranny in this town," I remarked.

"We have enough dirt in our ears this morning to sow an acre of potatoes, Oaks."

"It looks like Peter Goselowe has joined the cast of suspects, doesn't it?"

"Yes, it's like seven-card stud in poker. I have too many capital cards. Three kings—Goselow, Darby, and Barstow. Two queens—Dicey and Jessie. And," he added, "a knave in the form of a mythical brigand."

"What about Clay Severy?"

"For the moment, he is my ace in the hole, but something disturbs me. Poker is more a game based on a knowledge of human nature, you know. You can bluff an opponent out of a secure position."

"And you are looking for the bluff?"

"I am begging my mind to find it. It's rather warm, is it not?"

"Yes," I replied with trepidation, visions of New Port looming before me.

Judge Binsbee was sitting in the main dining room of the club when we entered.

"What ho, Captain," he greeted us. "Come try these squabs. They are delectable."

"I prefer oysters at midday, sir. What have you discovered?"

"Well, the Madeira is not top quality this year . . ."

"I think the Captain is referring to the case at hand, Judge," I reminded him. He had the remains of four squabs on his plate and two more on the platter.

"Oh, the case! Yes, the case. Well, I've had my deputies out and about. The people concerned are all cleared. The Barstows and the Darbys were home in their beds when this tragedy occurred. Peter Goselowe, being an attorney, is above reproach. It was a brigand, to be sure."

"How about Clay Severy?" Cork wanted to know, and so did I. Here we were paying for this glutton's lunch and had nothing to show for it. I have been around this murder business long enough to know that husbands' and wives' alibis are worthless, and the good judge may have known the law, but not lawyers.

"Oh, yes. Severy. Well, I was just getting to that." He turned to the rear of the dining room and beckoned Roland, the chief steward. The small mustached man came up to the table and bowed.

Roland had once been a chef to the Earl of Cumberland back home in England, and was quite proud of his association with royalty.

"Yes, your Honor?" he asked.

"Ah, Roland, have the boy bring two more of these succulent birds and more gravy. Hot, mind you."

"Roland," Cork said, "a moment, please. Did you see Mr. Clay leave the Club early this morning?"

"Not Mr. Clay, sir, but poor Mr. Cole went out around seven. I knew it was he because he had that blue garter on his arm. It's the first time I could ever tell those twins apart. It is quite a tragedy."

"Certainly is," the judge muttered through a mouth packed with squab meat.

For a moment, Roland lost his normal reserve. He spoke to Cork. "Captain, I am hesitant to say this, but in the interests of justice . . ."

"Justice be damned, man," Binsbee growled, "the birds!"

"Pray let the man speak, Judge," Cork cut him short. "What is it,

Roland?"

"Well, sir, there is talk all over town about the murder, and I feel I must speak. It may mean nothing, Captain, but on the night of the Cicisbeos drawing, I took a bribe."

"Bribe!" snarled the judge. "Probably to get you to serve hot food. What is this Club coming to?"

"Please, Judge," Cork pleaded. "Yes, Roland, what was it about?"

"The drawing, sir. Remember, I drew the lots. I was paid to pair Mr. Cole Severy with Mrs. Barstow."

"Indeed! By whom?"

"Mrs. Barstow, sir."

I shot a glance at Cork, who was frowning his brows. "Is that all?" he asked.

"No, sir. You see, Mrs. Darby made the same request an hour later. She offered a few shillings more, but I was committed to Mrs. Barstow. Of course, I didn't tell Mrs. Darby that. I know I could lose my position here, but Mr. Cole was always quite generous with me."

"Excellent!" Cork cried. "By the Duke's guns, Roland, bring me a plate of oysters and some vinegar."

"Then everything is all right?" Roland asked anxiously.

"Quite all right, Roland, You have sorted my cards well. Now, for heaven's sake, get those squabs for his Honor. He'll need his strength."

Roland went off to his duties and the magistrate looked puzzled. "You mean I have more to do, Captain?"

"Yes sir, you do. You are about to trap a murderer."

"That may well be, Captain, but I am first going to trap at least three more squab."

While the judge filled his face, Cork laid out his plan. By five that afternoon, everyone involved was to be gathered at the home of John and Dicey Darby.

"Jessie Barstow might not like that," I cautioned. "Remember what Madam Rygate said about Jessie and Dicey not visiting each other's homes."

"Precisely the point, Oaks. We are into the final act."

I know what he meant. He calls it a catastasis, and he loves it. It gives him a chance to play the hero. If he had the answer, and, from the look on his face, he certainly did, all he had to do was inform the judge

and effect an arrest. That would be the practical way. Cork is not practical. He is an actor. Actors are extravagant, both in emotion and coin.

At half past four that afternoon, Dicey Darby looked like she was about to have a fit, but she begrudgingly played hostess to the herd of people that had invaded her beautiful townhouse. Her husband John seemed discomforted by the invasion, but he, too, bore it all with an artificial smile.

In fact, artificiality was the main ingredient of the group. Madam Rygate and her husband Alonzo remained pompously aloof. Jessie and Trevor spoke genteel words through gritted teeth, and Peter Goselowe, the lawyer, was politely sullen.

Clay Severy sat on a sofa comforting the still-stricken Annette de Arbois, while Cork and Judge Binsbee sat at the table which had been pushed to the center of the salon. The judge was calling the group to order when four more people entered the room. The Fishingales and the Hammonds made their entry with apologies for being late.

"Dicey dahlin'," Peggy Fishingale babbled, "this is a dreadful hour for a party."

"'Tisn't a party, Mrs. Fishingale," the judge said, "'tis an inquest. Now let's all get comfortable. I'll have a mite more of that Madeira, ma'am," he said to Dicey, and a servant refilled his glass for the third time. He sipped and went on.

"Now you all know there's been a murder done, and it's been quite an inconvenience to us all."

"Mostly to my brother," Clay Severy snapped.

"I guess you're right, Clay. Sorry. Well, to my thinking, poor Cole was done in by a murderous brigand, but Captain Cork here has a notion or two and it can't hurt to hear him out."

"If it were an outlaw—" Alonzo Rygate was on his feet "—why wasn't a hue and cry raised, Binsbee? You officials are too blasted lax in your . . ."

Binsbee rapped the table with his Madeira glass. "Alonzo, this is a judicial proceeding, so sit down and shut up unless you're recognized by the bench. Go ahead, Captain, it's your deal."

Your "show" would have been more accurate, for Cork rose from his chair like a mainmast, and towered over the room.

"Ladies and gentlemen, at the outset I must announce that we are in the presence of a murderer, and I am prepared to unmask the culprit.

But first, let us get rid of this brigand idea. Cole had his purse on him when we found him, which rules out a thief. Also, the notion that Cole went out to play a practise round of golf has no substance. He had to have left the Halcyon Club when the fog was thick. Hardly a good time to play. More importantly, he did not have golf sticks with him."

"He could have been pacing the course," Peter Goselowe offered.

"To what end, sir? He had played on it countless times. No, it is manifest that he went there to meet someone. Now, another myth that must be dispelled is that no one can tell the Severy twins apart. I have only known them for a few days and I could distinguish them. Most of you have known them for years. Whoever killed Cole knew he was killing Cole."

"I challenge that," John Darby cut in. "I couldn't tell them apart, and I understand Roland, the club steward, couldn't either."

"Ah yes, Roland. We will get to him in a minute. Let us first examine why Cole was killed. Was it jealousy on the part of a husband, hatred by a former business associate, or that oldest of motives, murder for profit?"

"It seems to me," Goselow said, using a legalistic tone, "that you have conveniently brushed aside the brigand theory with conjecture. Cole could simply have been taking a walk."

"Would a brigand from the back country switch the garters to confuse the issue?"

"Switch?"

"Yes, Mr. Goselowe. Roland says the twin that left the club wore a blue garter on his sleeve, and yet when the body was found it had a polka-dot garter instead. That was done by someone intimate with the Cicisbeos ritual and your personal lives."

"Excuse me, Captain," Judge Binsbee said, "but we found the polka-dot thingamajig on Clay's coat. How could they be switched?"

"Garters are worn on both legs. Where is the other polka-dot garter, Mrs. Darby?"

She looked surprised, if not shocked. "Why, on my dressing table."

"Good. Judge, will you go with Mrs. Darby while she looks for it?"

The couple left the room and in their absence, John Darby became belligerent.

"See here, Cork, are you insinuating that my wife had anything to do with this? We were in our bed till near ten o'clock."

"Bed partners are mutually exclusive as alibi givers, sir. Ah, here is your wife."

Dacey and the judge returned and Dacey's face showed great puzzlement.

"I don't understand. It was there the other day. I seldom wear them."

"How convenient to have lost it," Jessie purred.

"By the way, Mrs. Barstow." Cork turned to her. "Where is your other blue garter?"

"There was only one. It was made for my wedding."

"I thought as much," Cork smirked, "and yet your impetuous act to embarrass Cole by making him wear your wedding garter precipitated the killer's plan. Or did you do it to irk your rival?"

Trevor Barstow started to grumble and Cork stopped him with an upraised hand. "Spare your breath, sir. Cole's rejection of both your wife and Dacey are common knowledge. Now let's get to the heart of the matter. Dacey's second garter is missing. I believe it was stolen by the killer and exchanged with the blue one on the body to make us think that Clay had been killed."

"But that doesn't make sense," Clay said. "I was alive and could say so."

"Of course, but the killer wanted us to think two things. One—that the person who killed your brother thought he was killing you and two, once his true identity was discovered, to throw suspicion on Dacey Darby or her husband, for they had access to the second garter. The first step was to convince you of the killer's affection for you. It worked, I see, for Mlle. de Arbois seems to be in your charge."

We all looked at the French coiffeuse, who glared at Cork. "*Ab-surde*," she said.

"Come now, Mademoiselle, the weight of logic will crush you. Cole had resisted Jessie's attentions all week, so why would he hasten to an early-morning meeting with a woman he cared nothing for? Besides, Jessie had no opportunity to steal the other garter, for she has never been in this house before. As for Dacey, why would she use her second garter to throw suspicion on herself? But you, Mlle., by your own admission were in this house dressing Dacey's hair last night." He turned to Dacey. "I assume your hair is dressed in your bedchamber?"

"Of course, at my dressing table."

"So you see, Mlle. de Arbois, your Gallic romantic nature has undone you. An Anglo-Saxon woman would have killed Cole and taken her chances that Clay would take her back. But you needed that dramatic moment in Clay's room when you feigned that he was Cole and professed your love for Clay. It was over-reaching, but what could you do? The real Cole had used you as he did all women. You learned too late that the quiet, steady Clay was the better catch and wanted to insure that he would believe your love. In one plunge of the blade, you took revenge on the roué, eliminated him from a joint estate, and got your original man back. A good morning's work, Mademoiselle."

Later that night we were packing our things at the Club for our departure in the morning for Philadelphia. Cork's exposure of all the town gossip had made him *persona non grata* to the quality, and I was jubilant. "We will probably never be invited here again," I said.

"Stop gloating, Oaks," he snarked.

But I did gloat—to myself, of course. This was the first case he had solved that did us any good.

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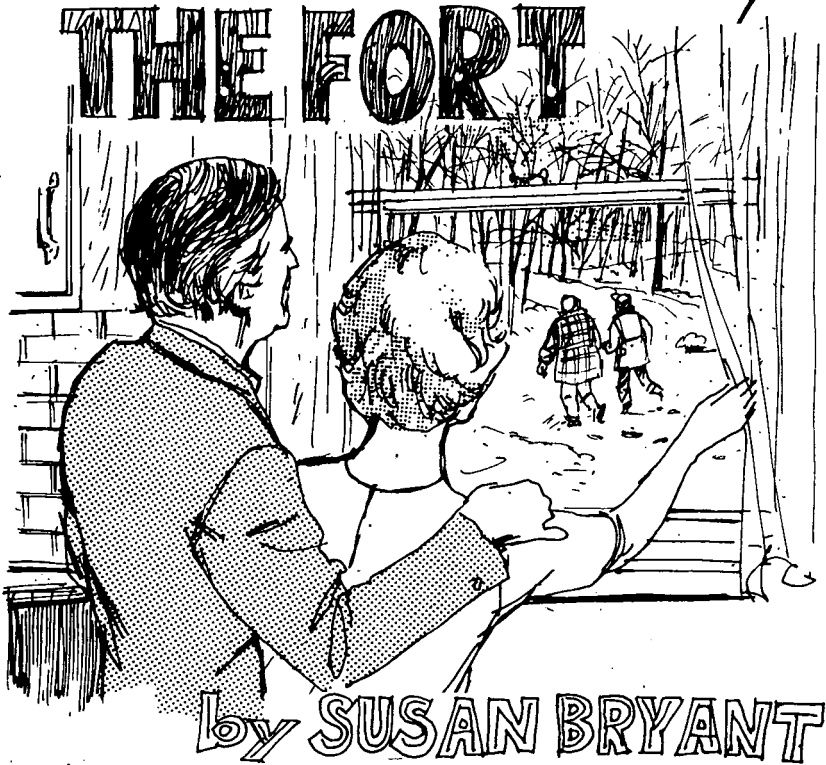
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Montaigne wrote, "Children's playings are not sports and should be deemed as their most serious actions . . ."



I first noticed them, cutting across our meadow, the first week after school opened. A funny pair, one skinny as all get-out, the other a regular butterball. They probably were taking a shortcut home from the school bus, and didn't want to ask our permission. Maybe they were shy, or maybe they figured because we were old and hadn't been here long, it didn't matter.

Anyway, I liked seeing them. We hadn't come across many young

people since we'd moved here; these two livened up the view. Not that I don't like the view, far from it. I love it. It's one of the reasons we took the house, as a matter of fact. From my kitchen window we can see this pretty, dipping meadow, and at the bottom of it the little wood was now changing colors very gently.

These two kids would cut across every afternoon, a few minutes after four, and I got in the habit of putting on the kettle when I saw them. Sometimes, if I thought Pete might be ready for an early break, I'd call him down from the study, and we'd lean across the sill and watch the meadow and the woods and the two kids quietly making their way across them.

There was something about their progress that bothered me, but I couldn't figure out what, exactly. Pete spotted it, though.

"You know," he said, "those boys don't act like boys usually do coming out of school. Not horsing around or anything."

That was it, of course. They were just walking, and I guess talking, too, but you know how boys do when they've been cooped up all day. There was none of that.

Pete and I settle into routines easily and then think they're cast in concrete. So it was a surprise to me when I saw the boys stop one afternoon and then veer up the hill to our house. As they got closer, I saw that the tubby one had a painfully acne-ridden face, though neither one could have been more than eleven or twelve. He had his stocking-cap in his hands when I opened the back door.

"Good afternoon," he said.

It was about the last thing I expected, but I answered him with equal formality.

"My name is Henry," he continued, "and this here is George."

Now this surprised me almost as much as the "good afternoon" part, because to me Henry is a *thin* name and George a fat one.

"Won't you come in?" I said.

If we keep this up, I thought, I'll be asking next if they'd like a cup of tea.

"Would you boys like a Coke or something?"

"Yes, m, that would be fine."

Henry again. George stood there, with his jaw slightly dropped, snuffing a bit. He didn't look stupid, though, just adenoidal. His pale eyes swam around like a pair of little fish, taking in every bit of my

kitchen. I saw that his nails were badly bitten, so much so that the flesh of the fingertips bulged.

I'm not so old that I can't remember how mean kids can be to each other, nor how much it hurts when you're different from the pack. These two were losers, at least from the pack point of view. I could see that clearly.

"George here, and me, we really like your woods down there," Henry said, when I'd handed them their drinks.

"They're very pretty," I replied. "My husband and I enjoy them too."

"Well, George here and me, we wonder if you'd mind us building a fort."

"A fort?"

"Yuh," Henry went on. By now he had seated himself at the kitchen table, very much at home, one tubby leg crossed over the other, swinging his foot. George still stood in the middle of the kitchen; he hadn't stirred an inch since he walked in. Occasionally, he gave a little slurp as he attacked his Coke.

"There's a great spot down there, a super place for a fort. We wouldn't hurt anything, just build that fort. Build that fort a little bit every day."

"But build it with what?"

"Oh, just branches and things. Not cut anything down, just branches that are lying around and some old logs and things."

You know that feeling of wishing so hard you could go back in time and change your end of a conversation? Oh, if only you could have it back, that moment that seemed so *little* then and seems so big now—to say whatever it was differently! Or not at all. Of all the things I've remembered about the fort, all during this troubled night, I've thought most of my little hesitation that afternoon, before answering Henry.

"Well, I can't see any harm in it," I told him, after a moment. And really, I thought, why not? Why not share the woods with these youngsters? "Suppose I ask my husband, though. He'll want to meet you boys, anyway, if you're going to be in our woods every day."

Of course Pete said yes, as I knew he would. He likes kids a lot, especially boys. (Though he was thrown off somewhat by these two, I could see that at once.)

Henry sprang up when Pete came in and called him "sir," but

George just gave a nod and shifted his feet a little. He had finished his Coke by now and had gotten back to work on his nails, staring at Henry while Henry negotiated with Pete about the fort. They agreed that the fort could be built of any brush lying about ("Really help you clear *up*, sir!") and logs, and that the boys' parents had to know they were in our woods after school.

We leaned across the sill after, waiting for the kettle to boil and watching them cut across the meadow on their way home.

"Wouldn't you think that George would be Henry, and Henry would be George?" was Pete's only comment. I turned then and put my arms around him for a second, on my way to picking up the whistling kettle.

All during those golden weeks the new house seemed to bring us luck. Pete was working on a new book, and the work went like silk. I made drapes and hung pictures and readied the garden for winter; knowing my touch, everywhere, was right. We rejoiced in the autumn and in each other; it was as if nothing could go wrong.

The boys used to drop in often to report on their progress and to have a Coke or—later, when the weather got colder—a cup of hot chocolate. Henry asked once if they could cut some fern and I said yes, it's turning brown anyway, but just don't pull up the roots. For a long time, George never said a word, just shuffled and snuffled and bit his nails when he wasn't drinking his Coke or chocolate. Pete and I would ask him questions, but he'd just nod or shake his head, or look at Henry, who would answer for him.

"Maybe the poor kid has a speech impediment," said Pete, "or maybe he just *can't* talk . . . no, I guess he'd be in a special school then."

Henry talked enough for both of them. He was always very polite, but when he got wound up he dropped the formality.

"My ma, she's a cleaning freak," he told us once. "Clean? Man, you never seen anyone clean all the time the way she does. My old man, he says they're gonna bury her with a mop in her hands."

"That Mrs. Skinner," he said another time, telling us about their neighbor, "I really hate her. She keeps that Buddy tied up all the time. Boy, do I hate her." Buddy was her old dog, who apparently loved Henry, and whined to get loose and play with him.

Henry usually sat at the kitchen table during these tales. Sometimes Pete joined us and listened to how bad things were for Henry and how

mean people were to him. I guess they were, too, and I wanted to feel sorry for him. At the same time, I found it hard to warm up to him and so, I knew, did Pete. That spotty face, all that fat, and all that hate. He hated his gym teacher, too, because he called Henry a "lard-ass" (Pete winced) and he hated most of all his teacher, Mrs. Gilday, because she kept sending him to the principal.

It was Mrs. Gilday's meanness which finally brought forth speech from George. "Why does she keep sending you to the principal?" I asked.

"Disruptive. She says I'm a 'disruptive influence'," Henry said.

"Boy, you've never *seen* such a disruptive influence," came suddenly from the middle of the room. I couldn't have been more astonished if Venus on the Half Shell had floated right out of George's mouth. In fact, I nearly called Pete. And that wasn't all:

"He's about the most disruptive influence anyone's ever seen. Mrs. Gilday, boy, she's never had a disruptive influence in her class like that before." Henry grinned during this bit of praise.

"And are *you* disruptive, George?" I certainly didn't want the stream to dry up now; maybe Pete would come down in time to catch some of it. But that was all; George shook his head. I never heard another word out of him.

Sometimes they'd come in several days running, sometimes we wouldn't see them for a week or more. By the time Christmas vacation came around, we guessed that the fort had been finished and that whatever games they played around it, they weren't building any more. The trees were bare now, of course, and sometimes I could spot a flash of color from one of their sweaters or caps in the thick of the wood. As far as we knew, they never had any other children with them.

Though we could see the fort as we walked through the woods, neither of us came close. "Kids' territory," said Pete once, and that was exactly the way I felt too. It looked good, though, a neat little structure of rotting logs and interwoven branches, set into a little dip. There was snow on the ground now, but the boys kept the area around the fort cleared. I noticed for the first time that holly was spraying out nearby.

During the holidays, the boys came to the woods daily, and I guess they stopped in about five times. I do remember we had little

stocking-fillers ready for them one afternoon. You'd have thought that with school closed, life would have been easier for Henry, but no such thing. His parents gave him a hard time.

"My old man, he's allergic to dogs, and he don't like it if I get near Buddy. If I go near Buddy and my ma tells him, he gives me the strap. Boy, sometimes I hate him, I really do."

It snowed heavily the morning of Christmas Eve, and Pete and I walked into the woods. It was heaven. We've always loved it when it was snowing.

"I've got something special for my girl tonight," Pete began as we walked toward the holly shrubs, tucking my hand into his pocket, and then I felt his hand crimp. In front of what was evidently the boys' fort were some blackened bricks.

Pete likes to sleep on things when he's mad, so he's usually very careful when he gets around to dealing with the person he's mad at. He gave Henry plenty of leeway on the next visit, before getting around to that campfire—and to something else that had come up to disturb us.

"We saw about Mrs. Gilday in the papers the other day," he said.

For poor Mrs. Gilday had found her way to the obituary pages, after a "short illness," they said. Two columns were devoted to her and all she had done for the many children who had passed through her classroom. It sounded as if she'd been teaching forever.

"Was she very old, Henry?" I asked.

"Yeah, I guess so. She was mean, anyway. That's for sure."

Pete waited a moment before changing the subject.

"You know, boys, we're pleased to have you build a fort in our woods, we told you that. But you know what we agreed—nothing destructive. Now, I see there's been a fire in front of the fort. We certainly don't want fires in our woods, I'm sure you understand the danger."

"Boy, I'm really sorry, sir. We just didn't know you felt that way about fires, did we, George?" George, working hard on his thumbnail, shook his head. "We won't ever do *that* again, sir, don't you worry."

But they did. Just before school reopened, I spotted a thin tail of smoke coming out of the woods. It was a beautiful day, bitter cold but perfectly clear. There must have been nearly two feet of snow on the ground that day. It seemed a shame to spoil those pretty woods on

such a day, with a fire. Pete's study faces on the other side of the house, so he couldn't have seen it. I put on my coat and boots and headed slowly through the fresh snow toward the smoke. By the time I got to the fort, the fire had been put out and covered with handfuls of snow. They must have moved fast; the only sign of them was their footprints.

Nor was there any further sign of them till one afternoon several weeks after school began. It was a miserable afternoon, wet and horribly cold, and I guessed they were more interested in hot chocolate than the woods.

"How's your new teacher, is she nice?" I asked.

"It's a he, his name's Mr. Sullivan. Boy, does he stink!"

"How can you tell so soon? Maybe it'll turn out that he doesn't stink at all."

"Naw, I mean he stinks. He stinks bad to the nose, I mean."

I looked at George, who nodded fairly briskly.

"You know, boys," I began, keeping my eyes on George, "we like seeing you and we like having you in our woods. But we meant what we said about fires." George shifted his feet and began to tear at his thumbnail, but I held his eyes with mine. "Now, I haven't said anything to my husband yet, but I will if it ever happens again. You built another fire by the fort, didn't you?"

George nodded again.

"No, *ma'am*! You know we wouldn't do that, when we said we'd never again." Henry turned toward his friend, his eyes narrowed in his puffy face. "Would we, George?"

George shook his head, looking miserable. He knew Henry had caught his nod.

A few days later, there was another fire in the woods. This time, Pete saw it, and he was as mad as I've ever seen him. By the time we got to the fort, it had been put out, of course, and there were the bootprints leading away from the tent, only one pair, from what I could make out. The smell from the fire was still in the air, an unpleasant smell, not the nice clean smell of a wood fire.

"Look at this," Pete said, raking something out from under the bricks. It was a hunk of plastic, pink and goeey. Nearly melted, it still showed clearly that it had been a doll.

"It smells awful—like Mr. Sullivan," I said.

"Maybe it is Mr. Sullivan," answered Pete. We laughed and linked arms, but as we began walking slowly up the hill, we knew the woods had been spoiled for us. By the time we got to the house, I could hear Pete pant—oh, just a little bit—and it caught at my heart.

Henry showed up a few days later. "Where's George?" I asked.

"Real sick," was the reply. "Real sick. Like his throat's all closed up."

"Oh, what a shame, I'm so sorry. And you won't be able to enjoy the fort without him, I suppose?"

"Oh, sure, sure I can. I don't need George, who needs old George, anyway?"

I let this pass. There was something else to be dealt with before Pete came down.

"Henry—you know you *promised* about the fires. They're so ugly, they spoil the woods, and this makes us both very unhappy. Please don't burn any more, please." I'm begging this child, I thought; am I afraid of him?

"I never made no fires, honest. Didn't I *tell* you I wouldn't? Don't you worry, there won't be no more fires."

And there it would have rested had Pete not come down.

"Henry, you know we asked you not to build fires, didn't we? But you went and built another one."

"No, sir, I didn't." Henry stared at Pete sullenly.

"I think you did, and I'm telling you now not to do it again, because I'll have to call your parents if you do. Because when you build a fire here, you're being destructive on my property."

Henry got up slowly. I remember that he was picking at one of his spots, and remember thinking that I really should pour boiling water over his cup and spoon. Very carefully and distinctly he said, "You're a son of a bitch. You're both dumb, old sonabitches."

"Get out of here."

Pete's face was dark and I was so frightened for him I was shaking.

I'm sitting at my desk now, writing this by a dim study lamp. Pete's had a troubled night, and I dare not turn on more light, so the writing may not be very clear. I hope it is, I hope it can be read. It's important that I get down everything I've seen. Everything I know.

I went down to the fort yesterday afternoon and found what I ex-

pected, though I hadn't actually thought it all out till after Henry had left. It's very tidy inside the fort, all lined with the fern they cut those many weeks ago. All the plastic dolls are neatly piled up on top of each other. A lot of them have been singed, just slightly, in various spots. The ones which haven't been singed have had other things done to them; I'm trying not to think about it. Maybe whoever reads this will see for himself. A few, though, just have their arms or their legs or heads twisted, and others have colored pins stuck in them.

There's a toy broom lying there, no doubt belonging to some doll who's "ma." Probably "the old man" and the gym teacher and Mrs. Skinner are lying around somewhere. Maybe Pete was right about Mr. Sullivan, maybe he's there, too, and heaven knows who else.

There's a charred lump in a corner by itself, on its own special bed of dried fern. That must be Mrs. Gilday. And I suppose the doll with its neck tightly tied with a strip of rag is George. Poor George, who was "real sick . . . like his throat's all closed up."

It must be about five-thirty or six. I don't dare walk across the room to check the bedside clock, because the floor creaks and it might wake Pete. He's tossing restlessly and groaning, and I wish I could hold him in my arms without waking him. I wish I could tell myself that he's just coming down with a cold or the flu and believe myself. I wish I weren't so afraid.

The wind is coming our way, and the acrid smell of the smoke is strong.

Dear God, make sure Henry throws in two of them.

It would be awful if he burned just one.



The swan mourns . . . and not alone . . .

have you ever seen this woman?

by
**John
Lutz**



David Hastings awoke slowly, painfully, not really wanting to lose the oblivion of sleep. As he opened his eyes to slits he raised a hand gingerly to his throbbing head and touched his fingertips just below his hairline. His hand came away with blood on it, and his eyes opened all the way.

He was in the bedroom, he realized, lying on his back on the made

bed. Every beat of his heart echoed with pain in his head. It was morning, judging by the softly angled rays of light filtering through the curtains, the bark of a faraway dog, the distant clanging of a trash can. Hastings' mind was blank to everything but an unexplainable dread, a terrible fact just beyond his consciousness that he knew he would soon have to face.

With great effort Hastings raised himself and supported his upper body on the bed with his elbows. Summoning even more strength, he twisted and sat on the edge of the mattress, noticing that his white shirtfront was covered with scarlet-brown splotches. He saw, too, that there were several stains on his wrinkled checked sportcoat and his tie. Hastings stood, took a few heavy steps, and leaned on his dresser to look at himself in the mirror.

Vacant, frightened eyes stared out of a face stained with blood from a long deep gash high on his forehead. There was another deep cut on his left cheekbone. Quickly, Hastings turned away from the mirror. He was hot, his body suddenly burning. He peeled off his coat and tie and hung them in the closet, then he unbuttoned the top two buttons on his shirt.

The door to the living room was half open. For a reason he couldn't fathom Hastings knew he didn't want to go through that door, but he also knew that he must. He began moving toward the door with uneven groping steps, realizing for the first time that he was wearing only one shoe. As he pushed the door all the way open and stepped into the living room he shuddered, his disbelieving eyes narrowed.

There were slivers of clear glass scattered over the dark green carpet, as if a crystal bomb had exploded in the room. Hastings' left shoe was lying on its side, still tied, near the armchair. On the other side of the room, where the shattered pieces of crystal were heaviest, the carpet was soaked by a huge reddish stain. And in the center of that stain, near the television with its wildly rolling and distorted silent picture, lay the still, the unbelievably still body of Agnes.

In horrible fascination Hastings extended his outstretched hands before him, as if pushing something away, and stepped slowly over and gazed down at his dead wife.

Agnes's nightgown was torn and wrapped about her neck and shoulders. Her face, framed in a tangle of auburn hair, was completely crusted with dried blood, and the head had been unmercifully bat-

tered, unmercifully and brutally mutilated.

Hastings' breathing was abnormally loud, like steam hissing in the small room. He began backing away from the body, cutting his stocking foot on a piece of broken crystal. Then he slumped down and sat on the floor, his back against the wall. His mind was a revolving, horror-filled maze, a jumble of terrible puzzle pieces that would not fit together no matter how they were turned. With dazed eyes he looked slowly about the living room, and he knew then where the shattered crystal had come from.

The swan. The glass swan that Agnes's mother had sent them from Mexico last summer. Probably it was a typical tourist item, but Agnes had liked it and placed it on the bookcase in the living room. Hastings had also rather liked the swan. It seemed to be made of a very delicate clear crystal that had a prismlike effect so the shapes and colors reflected within the rounded body and long graceful neck were dismembered and twisted to fit the graceful lines of the sculpting. And now it had been used . . . for this.

Hastings closed his eyes and rested the back of his head against the living room wall, and with a pain that was both physical and mental he began trying to recreate in his mind the horror of last night.

He remembered parking his car in front of his small brick home on Lime Avenue, he remembered that clearly enough. He had worked late at the office and hadn't left until almost nine o'clock.

The house was lighted, the glow of the living room swag-lamp shining through the drawn drapes. Hastings walked up the winding cement path onto the porch and turned the doorknob. But the front door was locked. That hadn't seemed normal to Hastings; Agnes seldom locked doors of any kind. He drew his house key from his pocket, unlocked the front door and entered the house.

Here Hastings bowed his head and rested it painfully on his drawn-up knees. He didn't want to remember the rest—his mind recoiled from it. But he made himself fit the pieces together.

Agnes had been at the opposite end of the living room, near the turned-on television set, and she was struggling with a man, a tall man dressed in dark clothes, a man who had his gloved hand pressed to Agnes's mouth.

What had the man looked like? His features were blurred—as if he had a nylon stocking pulled down over his face.

The man saw Hastings and was motionless for a second, then he felled Agnes with a chopping blow across the back of her neck and came at Hastings.

The man was bigger than Hastings, and stronger, so the struggle didn't last long. Hastings remembered being shoved back toward the bedroom door, remembered seeing the man's gloved fingers curl around the natural handle of the crystal swan's neck. And then the swan smashed into his head. The man pushed him violently against the closed bedroom door, breaking the latch and springing it open as Hastings staggered backward into the bedroom. Again the swan smashed into his head, and Hastings fell backward across the bed. He remembered feeling the welcome softness of the mattress before losing consciousness.

Hastings raised his head from his knees and looked at the bedroom doorframe, at the splintered wood near the latch. Then he looked again, for just a second, at the still body of his wife.

After knocking him unconscious, Hastings thought, the man must have gone back into the living room and continued his attack on Agnes. Somehow Hastings knew that the object was rape from the beginning. Agnes must have regained consciousness, must have begun to fight or scream, or attempted to run, and the man with the stockinged face must have used the swan to beat her to the silence and submissiveness of death.

Slowly Hastings raised himself to his feet and stood unsteadily, leaning against the wall. Then he made his way into the bathroom and splashed cold water on his face. For a long time he stood slumped over the washbasin, watching the red tinted water swirl counterclockwise down the drain. When he was finally ready, he went back into the bedroom and picked up the phone.

The police converged on Hastings's house in great numbers, photographing, dusting for fingerprints, examining, discussing. And then Agnes was taken away by two men in white uniforms, and Hastings was left with a Lieutenant Sam Newell, a crewcut heavy-browed man who had been personally assigned to the case. Hastings' neighbor and good friend Philip Barrett also remained in the house after all the other policemen but Newell had departed. The three men sat in the living

room drinking coffee that Barrett had been thoughtful enough to brew.

Agnes's murder had occurred in Plainton, the community in which they lived a scant few miles from the city, and while the larger and more efficient Metropolitan Police Department would give some assistance, solving the crime was the responsibility only of the Plainton Police Department, for everything had happened within their jurisdiction. A murder investigation was not the sort of task Lieutenant Newell undertook very often.

"How old was Agnes, Mr. Hastings?" he asked, flipping the leather cover of his notebook.

"Thirty-six, the same as me," Hastings replied, watching Newell make quick jabbing motions at his notepaper with a short pencil.

"And did she have any enemies that you knew of?"

"Agnes was well liked by everyone," Phil Barrett said in a sad voice. "It's impossible to believe this has happened."

Lieutenant Newell glared at him over the rim of his coffee cup. "If you don't mind, Mr. Barrett, we'll get to your statement in the course of the investigation."

Barrett said nothing, raising his own steaming coffee cup to his lips as if he hadn't heard the lieutenant.

"Phil's right," Hastings said. "Agnes didn't have any enemies that I knew of."

"Somebody didn't like her," Newell said. "That swan was shattered into such small pieces we couldn't fit it together." He made a short notation in his book. "Understand now, Mr. Hastings, this next question is simply part of the routine. Did your wife Agnes have any . . . extramarital affairs? Had you heard any rumors of her running around?"

Hastings couldn't keep the agitation out of his voice. "We were happily married, Lieutenant."

"You know what they say about who's the last to know," Newell said. He glanced at Phil Barrett.

"Agnes wasn't the type to go out on her husband," Barrett said.

"What kind of activities was she interested in?" Newell asked.

"As I told you," Hastings said, "we never had any children. Agnes contented herself pretty much with staying home, watching TV, and she worked hard keeping the house neat." He looked around at the bloodstained disarray of the living room and put his head down.

Lieutenant Newell flipped his leather notebook shut and stood slowly, betraying what he was, a policeman with sore feet. "In all honesty there's not much here to work with. The description of the man you struggled with—tall, average weight, dark clothes, stocking mask—it's a phantom. We'll be in touch with you, Mr. Hastings, and I'll let you know about the coroner's report on your wife." He nodded. "I'm sorry," he said and left.

"Don't pay too much attention to his questions, Dave," Phil Barrett told Hastings when they were alone. "They're routine."

"I don't mind the questions," Hastings said, "if they'll help catch Agnes's killer."

Barrett stood and drained the last of his coffee. "Why don't you go in and get some rest?" he said. "I'll clean this place up—the police said it'd be okay."

Hastings nodded, feeling suddenly as tired as he'd ever felt. "That's nice of you, Phil."

Barrett shrugged. "Listen," he said in a concerned voice, "if you'd rather spend tonight at our place, Myra and I would be glad to have you . . ."

"Thanks anyway," Hastings said, "but with a shower and some sleep I think I can face things here." He rose to go to the bedroom, and the hurt and anger seemed to rise with him. "Damn it, Phil! Why would anybody want to kill Agnes? Why did this maniac have to choose her for a victim?"

"Who knows?" Barrett said in a sympathetic voice. "He might have just seen her somewhere and followed her to find out where she lived. I guess the husband of any victim would be asking himself the same questions you are."

"I guess so," Hastings said wearily. He touched the bandage on his forehead over the wound that the police surgeon had stitched, as if to assure himself of its reality, and, sidestepping the broken glass, he walked from the living room.

The next afternoon Lieutenant Newell telephoned Hastings to inform him of the coroner's report. Agnes had been sexually molested. Newell then asked Hastings about any men who had expressed interest in Agnes, any rejected suitors. But Hastings could think of no one. He and Agnes had been married fourteen years. The murderer might have

been a psycho, Newell speculated, a maniac who had chosen Agnes by chance out of millions without even knowing her name and struck her as lightning might strike. He assured Hastings that the police would keep working on the case and hung up . . .

A week passed, and as far as Hastings was concerned the Plainton Police Department wasn't working hard enough. They had come up with nothing.

The desire to see Agnes's killer apprehended had grown in Hastings, causing him agonizing days and sleepless nights. And the feeling persisted that there was something he should know, something that skirted the outer edges of his mind and that, try as he may, he could never grasp.

Hastings began to telephone Lieutenant Newell regularly, asking him about progress on the case, about what the Plainton Police Department was doing to bring about progress. But there was never any news. He always got a polite brushoff. He came to realize that the Plainton Police Department had finished digging, that they would never apprehend Agnes's killer.

It was then that Hastings decided to take action himself. Lying awake nights he worked out a general plan of investigation. The first thing he did was to go next door and talk to his neighbor, Phil Barrett. Here Hastings possessed an advantage over the police, for he knew that Barrett would talk to him confidentially and with complete honesty.

Barrett was in his long narrow back yard, spraying his rose bushes. As Hastings approached him he stooped to spread the aerosol mist on the bottom side of some perforated leaves and smiled up at Hastings.

"Morning, Dave."

Hastings nodded, watching some of the spray drift up and past him.

"Haven't seen you," Barrett said. "How are you getting along?"

Hastings smiled and shrugged.

Barrett straightened and wiped his hands on the paint-stained trousers he was wearing. "Have the police found out anything?"

"No," Hastings said, "and it looks now like they won't. That's what I wanted to talk to you about, Phil. I need some honest answers to some questions."

Barrett looked at him with a vague puzzled frown. "I wouldn't lie to you, Dave."

"Not unless you thought you were doing me a favor," Hastings said. "I want to know about Agnes."

Barrett grinned and shook his head. "She was your wife. You know more about her than I do."

"But you might have heard some things. Things a woman's husband wouldn't hear." The breeze mussed Hastings' combed brown hair, causing a lock to fall over the red scar on his forehead. "Did you hear anything, Phil?"

The aerosol can hissed as Barrett loosed some spray in the general direction of one of his rose bushes, then he stood staring at the ground. "I heard a few things, Dave. They didn't mean anything, they were none of my business."

"They're my business now," Hastings said quietly.

Barrett continued to stare at the newly mowed grass for a while before speaking. "I heard she'd been seen a few places around town," he said, "restaurants, taverns, places like that. That's all I heard . . ."

"Seen with men?" Hastings asked, holding back the sudden flow of anger and disbelief that he should have expected.

"Yes, Dave." Barrett raised his head to look Hastings in the eye. "With men, different men, but like I said all I ever heard was second or third hand. It could be that none of it was true, just the kind of loose talk that sometimes follows an attractive woman."

"Did you believe what you heard?" Hastings asked.

Barrett looked at him with an agonized expression as he squinted into the sun. "That's not a fair question, Dave. I didn't know whether to believe the stories or not. You know how Agnes was—she just didn't seem the type."

No, Hastings thought, by all outward appearances Agnes wasn't the type. Auburn-haired, dark-eyed Agnes, slender, pretty in her plain dress or modest slacks, smiling as she worked about the house . . .

"I'm sorry, Dave."

Hastings felt sick. Lately someone was always sorry for him. He nodded to Barrett, said his thanks and walked back to his empty house.

The bottle of bourbon he'd bought a month ago was in the kitchen cupboard above the sink, still over half full. He got it down, sat at the table and poured himself a drink. He couldn't imagine Agnes having affairs with other men. That was another side of her that he couldn't believe existed. But there had been stories, rumors that had never

reached his ears. It could be that they were false, and yet who knew what happened on the dark side of a person's mind?

Hastings stood and replaced the bottle in the cupboard, setting the empty glass in the sink. Then he went into the living room and began to rummage through the desk drawers for a clear and recent photograph of Agnes. Finally he settled on one, a color snapshot of his dead wife wearing a pink blouse, staring out of the photo directly at the camera with a tender and somewhat embarrassed smile.

As Hastings slipped the photo into his wallet he found its exact duplicate, another print, behind his identification card. He slid the second photo in the cellophane pocket on top of the first.

That evening he began. He shaved for the first time that day, put on a suit, and drove toward town.

The first place he stopped was on the outskirts of the city, a lounge and restaurant named Tony's. He went to the bar and showed the bartender Agnes's photograph.

"Do you recognize her?" Hastings asked. "Have you seen this woman in the past few months?"

"You the police?" the bartender asked.

"No," Hastings said, "I'm her husband."

The bartender looked at Hastings, then squinted at the photograph. He shook his head. He hadn't seen her, he told Hastings. At least if he had he couldn't recall. There were a lot of women who came in here with men. There were a lot who came in alone and left with men. It was impossible to remember them all.

Hastings thanked the bartender, bought him a beer and left.

He drove to three more places, and none of the people there remembered Agnes. Though at a place called The Lion's Mane a red-vested bartender had stared at Hastings in a peculiar fashion as if he were about to say something, then a customer had called him away.

Hastings's last stop was at The Purple Bottle on Wilton Avenue. The bartender was a round-faced man with a mustache who reminded Hastings of somebody. He approached Hastings and smiled at him.

"Bourbon and water," Hastings said. He was sitting toward the end of the long bar, away from the other customers, and when the bartender returned with his drink he opened his wallet and showed him the photograph.

"Do you recognize her?" he asked. "Do you remember ever seeing her in here?"

The round-faced bartender set the glass on a coaster and stared down at the snapshot.

"She's pretty," he said, "but I don't ever remember her coming in here. Of course, I could have forgotten." He turned and beckoned to a younger bartender who was working at the other end of the bar, a slender young man with long black hair.

"Billy," he asked the young bartender, "have you ever seen this woman?"

Billy stared at the photograph curiously, then looked at Hastings.

"No," he said, "but I think I remember her picture."

Hastings' hand began to tremble as he raised his glass to his lips.

"Sure," Billy said, "somebody came in here—must have been about a month ago—showed me a photograph and asked me if I'd seen the girl."

"Are you positive?" Hastings asked.

"I don't know. I seen her picture before somewhere."

"Could it have been the newspapers?" Hastings asked.

Billy's lean face brightened. "Maybe. Maybe the paper. Why? She do something?"

"No," Hastings said, "nothing."

The round-faced bartender's eyes moved to convey a look to his companion, and the younger bartender moved away toward the other end of the bar.

Hastings left without finishing his drink and drove home.

He shut his front door behind him and stood leaning against it, breathing as if he'd been running hard. The nerve of that young punk, saying he'd seen Agnes's picture before! The nerve of him!

Hastings wiped his forehead, got undressed and took a shower. Wearing pajamas and a bathrobe, he walked into the kitchen to prepare something to eat. He couldn't get the young bartender's words out of his mind, the sincere expression in the eyes.

There was nothing in the refrigerator, only frozen food that would have to thaw, and Hastings was hungry. He decided to get dressed and go out someplace to eat, someplace that stayed open late. He would treat himself to a steak dinner and forget about the rest of the evening.

Slamming the refrigerator door shut, he turned and walked into the bedroom.

He dressed in dark slacks and a white shirt, then walked to the closet and absently pulled out his checked sport coat, not realizing until after he'd put it on that it was the one he'd worn the night of the murder. It was still wrinkled and blood-splattered. Unconsciously he slipped his hand into the right side pocket, and his body stiffened as if a thrown switch had sent electricity through him.

Hastings withdrew his hand from the pocket, staring at it as if it belonged to someone else. Clutched firmly in his grip was the graceful head and jaggedly broken neck of the glass swan.

He stood staring at the crystal head, felt the heft of the smooth glass in his hand. He remembered now. *He had to remember!* He had been in that tavern before, asking the young bartender about Agnes. Lately she had been cold to him, and Hastings had heard the rumors about her and had simply wanted to check. And no one had recognized the photograph—in the half dozen likely places he'd gone to that night no one had recognized the photograph.

Still, that hadn't been enough for Hastings. He had gone home at nine that evening after his inquiries at the various night spots, and he had tried to force her to make love. Agnes had refused his advances and he had confronted her with the ugly rumors he had been unable to substantiate. She had said he was crazy, that they were only rumors and he could believe them if he liked. Then she had screamed that she no longer loved him, that she wanted a divorce. He had grabbed her then, and she had struggled. He could see her now as he pushed her toward the bedroom, her slender hand closing on the crystal swan neck.

Then she had struck him twice, brutally, on the head.

Hastings shuddered as he remembered his rage, as he remembered wresting the swan from Agnes and smashing it against her head until she was dead, walking her about the living room in a grotesque dance, striking her over and over until her face and head were a horrible -- bloody mass among glittering pieces of broken crystal.

And then . . .

He refused to remember what had happened then. He remembered only stumbling to the bedroom, kicking open the door, falling dizzily onto the mattress.

Hastings stood in trembling horror, staring down at what he'd pulled from his pocket. Then, as if a sudden soothing hand had passed over him, he stopped trembling.

He walked into the kitchen and laid the neck and head of the broken swan in the sink. Trancelike, he opened a drawer and brought out a metal meat-tenderizer mallet. Then rhythmically he brought the mallet down again and again, shattering what was left of the swan into tiny crystals that he washed down the drain in a swirl of water. After replacing the mallet in the drawer, he opened the cupboard above the sink and got down the bottle of bourbon. With a slow and clumsy rhythm, he walked back into the bedroom.

He awoke slowly, painfully, not really wanting to lose the oblivion of sleep. It was morning, judging by the softly angled rays of light filtering through the curtains, the bark of a faraway dog, the distant clanging of a trash can. He struggled to a sitting position on the edge of the mattress, knocking the empty bottle onto the floor. Too much to drink last night, he told himself reproachfully, wondering why he had been so foolish. Looking down at his wrinkled and blood-stained sport coat, he remembered it was the one he'd been wearing the night of Agnes's murder.

Drawing a deep breath, he stood. He peeled off the sport coat and hung it in the closet, then he removed the rest of his clothes and stumbled into the bathroom to shower.

After a breakfast of eggs and toast, he picked up the telephone and called Lieutenant Newell to see if there was any news on Agnes's case. There was none, the lieutenant said in an officially sympathetic voice. He assured Hastings that the Plainton Police Department had done everything possible.

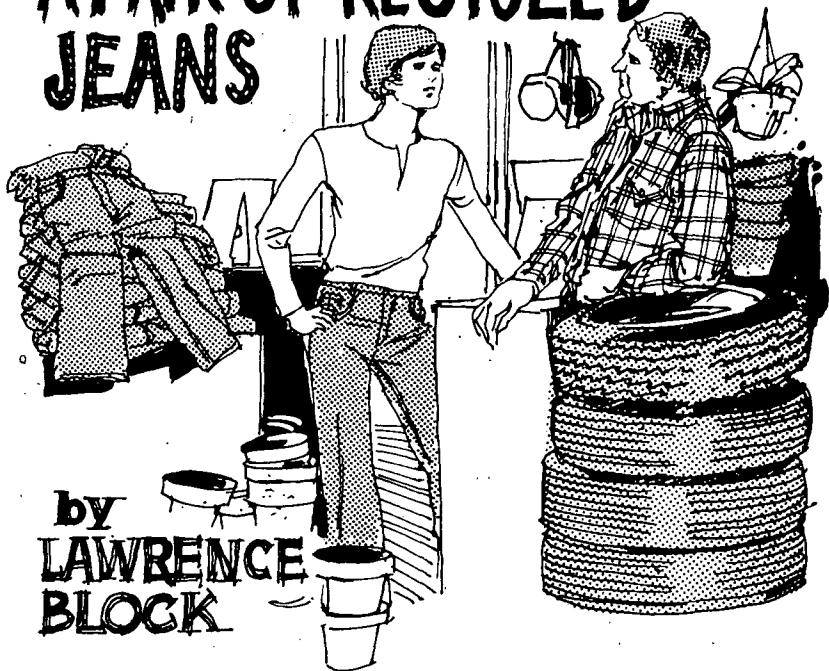
Hastings thanked him and hung up.

That evening he drove into the city and at random chose a neon-lighted tavern. Benny's was the name of the place. Hastings stared straight ahead as he walked across the parking lot, entered and sat at the bar. When the bartender came he ordered a beer and as his drink was set before him he withdrew his wallet and showed the bartender the picture of Agnes.

"Has she ever been in here?" he asked. "Have you ever seen this woman?"

Let every man tend to his own business . . .

A PAIR OF RECYCLED JEANS



by
**LAWRENCE
BLOCK**

On what a less resourceful writer might safely describe as a fateful day, young Robert Tillinghast approached the proprietor of a shop called The Last Resort. "Actually," he confided, "I don't think I can buy anything today, but there's a question I'd like to ask. It's been on my mind for the longest time. I was looking at those recycled jeans over by the far wall."

"I'll be getting another hundred pair in Monday afternoon," the

proprietor said.

"A hundred pair," Robert marveled. "That's certainly quite a lot."

"It's the minimum order."

"Is that a fact? And they'll all be the same quality and condition as these you have now?"

"Absolutely. Of course, I won't know what sizes I'll be getting."

"I guess that's just a matter of chance."

"It is. But they'll all be first-quality name brands, and they'll all be in good condition, broken in but not broken to bits. That's a sort of an expression I made up to describe them."

"I like it," said Robert, not too sincerely. "You know, there's a question that's been nagging at my mind for the longest time. You get six dollars a pair for the recycled jeans, and it probably wouldn't be out of line to guess that they cost you about half that amount." The proprietor agreed that it wouldn't be far out of line to make that estimate. "Well, that's the whole thing," Robert said. "You notice the jeans I'm wearing?"

The proprietor glanced at them. They were nothing remarkable, a pair of oft-washed Lee Riders that were just beginning to go thin at the knees. "Very nice," the man said. "I'd get six dollars for them without a whole lot of trouble."

"But I wouldn't want to sell them."

"Of course not. Why should you? They're just getting to the comfortable stage."

"Exactly!" Robert grew intense, and his eyes bulged slightly. "Exactly," he repeated. "The recycled jeans I see in all the shops are just at the point where they're breaking in right. They're never really worn out. Unless you only put the better pairs on display?"

"No, they're all like that."

"That's what everybody says." Robert had had much the same conversation before in the course of his travels. "All top quality, all in excellent condition, and all in the same stage of wear."

"So?"

"So," Robert said in triumph, "who throws them out?"

"Oh."

"The company that sells them. Where do they get them from?"

"You know," the proprietor said, "it's funny you should ask. The same question's occurred to me. People buy these jeans because this is

the way they want 'em. But who in the world *sells* them?"

"That's what I'd like to know. Not that it would do me any good to have the answer, but the question preys on my mind."

"Right," the proprietor said. "I could understand about children's jeans, that kids would outgrow them, but what about the adult sizes?"

"I'll be wearing jeans as long as I live," Robert said recklessly. "I'll never get too old for jeans."

The proprietor seemed not to have heard. "Maybe it's different out in the farm country," he said. "I buy these jeans from a firm in Rockford, Illinois—"

"I've heard of the firm," Robert said. "They seem to be the only people supplying recycled jeans."

"Only one I know of too. Maybe things are different in their area. Maybe out there people like brand-new jeans and once they break them in they think of them as worn out."

"I guess that's possible."

"It's the only explanation I can think of." He shook his head. "Funny you should ask a question that I've asked myself so many times and never put into words."

"That Rockford firm," Robert said. "That's another thing I don't understand. Why would they develop a sideline business like recycled jeans?"

"Well, you never know about that," the man said. "Diversification is the keynote of American business these days. Take me. I started out selling flowerpots, and now I sell flowerpots and guitar strings and re-capped tires and recycled jeans. There are people who would call that an unusual combination."

"I suppose there are," said Robert.

An obsession of the sort that gripped Robert is a curious thing. After a certain amount of time either it is metamorphosized into neurosis or it is tamed, surfacing periodically as a vehicle for casual conversation. Young Robert Tillinghast, neurotic enough in other respects, suppressed his curiosity on the subject of recycled jeans and only raised the question at times when it seemed particularly apropos.

And it did seem apropos often enough. Robert was touring the country, depending for his locomotion upon the kindness of passing motorists. As charitable as his hosts were, they were apt to insist upon

a quid pro quo of conversation, and Robert had learned to converse extemporaneously upon a variety of subjects. One of these, of course, was that of recycled blue jeans, the subject close at once to his heart and his skin. His own jeans often served as the lead-in to this line of conversation, being either funky and mellow or altogether disreputable, depending upon one's point of view, which in turn largely depended upon one's age.

One day in West Virginia, on that stretch of Interstate 79 leading from Morgantown to Charleston, Robert thumbed a ride with a man who, though not many years older than himself, drove a late-model Cadillac. Robert, his backpack in the back seat and his body in the front, could not have been more pleased. He had come to feel that hitching a ride in an expensive car endowed one with all the privileges of ownership without the nuisance of making the payments.

But as the car cruised southward, he noticed that the driver was glancing repeatedly at Robert's legs. Covert glances at that, sidelong and meaningful. Robert sighed inwardly. This, too, was part of the game, and had ceased to shock him. But he had been looking forward to riding in this car and now he would have to get out.

The driver said, "Just admiring your jeans."

"I guess they're just beginning to break in," Robert said, relaxing now. "I've had them a while."

"Well, they look just right now. Got a lot of wear left in them."

"I guess they'll last for years," Robert said. "With the proper treatment. You know, that brings up something I've been wondering about for a long time." And he went into his routine, which had become rather a set piece by this time, ending with the question that had plagued him from the start. "So where on earth does that Rockford company get all these jeans? Who provides them?"

"Funny you should ask," the young man said. "I don't suppose you noticed my license plates before you got in?" Robert admitted he hadn't. "Few people do," the young man said. "*Land of Lincoln* is the slogan on them, and they're from Illinois. And I'm from Rockford. As a matter of fact, I'm with that very company."

"But that's incredible! For the longest time I've wanted to know the answers to my questions, and now at long last—" He broke off. "Why are we leaving the Interstate?"

"By-pass some traffic approaching Charleston. There's construction

ahead and it can be a real bottleneck. Yes, I'm with the company."

"In Sales, I suppose? Servicing accounts? You certainly have enough accounts. It seems every store in the country buys recycled jeans from you people."

"Our distribution is rather good," the young man said, "and our sales force does a good job. But I'm in Acquisitions myself. I go out and round up the jeans. Then back in Rockford they're washed to clean and sterilize them, patched if they need it, and—"

"You're actually in Acquisitions?"

"That's a fact."

"Well, this is my lucky day!" Robert exclaimed. "You're just the man to give me all the answers. Where do you get the jeans? Who sells them to you? What do you pay for them? What sort of person sells perfectly good jeans?"

"That's a whole lot of questions at once."

Robert laughed, happy with himself, his host, and the world. "I just don't know where to start. Say, this by-pass is a small road, isn't it? I guess not many people know about it and that's why there's no other traffic on it. Poor saps'll all get tangled in traffic going into Charleston."

"We'll miss all that."

"That's good luck. Let's see, where can I begin? All right, here's the big question and I've always been puzzled by this one. What's a company like yours doing in the recycled jeans business?"

"Well," said the young man, "diversification is the keynote of American business these days."

"But a company like yours," Robert said. "Rockford Dog Food, Inc. How did you ever think to get into the business in the first place?"

"Funny you should ask," said the young man, braking the car smoothly to a stop.



It's a double pleasure to deceive a deceiver . . .

SUPERSCAM

by

FRANCIS M.
NEVINS, Jr.



Every afternoon a segment of the St. Francis Hotel's ornate lobby is transformed into an elegant little tearoom. Waitresses in low-cut velvet minidresses wheel carts full of creamy pastries and gleaming silver urns into the alcove, where they dispense coffee, tea, and glimpses of their cleavage. During my few months' stay in San Francisco I had grown to savor the ritual, preferably with a companion of the opposite sex and as a quiet prelude to more passionate activity a bit later in the day. On

this particular rainy afternoon, however, I nibbled alone. I ate and drank in an unobtrusive but precise manner, two bites of a finger-shaped eclair and then a sip of tea, two more bites and another sip. That was the signal so the young man would know me.

A tall, thirtyish man in a three-piece Italian silk suit and with an off-white trenchcoat draped over his arm crossed the lobby slowly and made a casual survey of the alcove. He was Lincoln-lanky, tanned by the sun or a first-rate lamp, thick and dark of hair and sporting an Errol Flynn mustache. He cast an appreciative glance at a particularly scrumptious waitress, sauntered into the alcove and seated himself in the empty red plush armchair next to me and ordered a cup of decaffeinated black coffee. That was the signal.

"Roy Cogan," he said barely above a whisper, eyes focused straight ahead on the coffee urn. "The word was that Milo Turner might have a job for me."

"Word from where?"

"The Jock," he said.

Eight days ago, when I had finished working out all the details, I'd called Jock Schultz in L.A., and asked him to find me a young man of a certain description. I was too old to pull this scam alone, and besides I don't look Greek. Jock had called back yesterday to set up this meeting.

"Background?" I asked the young man.

"Drama school, came out west to break into movies or TV. Rotten luck. Movies are dead and TV's dying. I drifted into the life and discovered I was good at it." He named a few recent scams in which he'd taken part, and gave me the distinct impression that with a few more years of practice he could develop into one of the luminaries of our profession. We finished our beverages and cabbed to my apartment on Geary, where an hour of private conversation with him completed the task of satisfying me. His age was right, his looks were right, and he had enough skill as an actor to put on a touch of Greek accent if needed. "You're hired," I said. "I've got a part for you to play." His eyes glittered with interest.

What had generated the scam had been the death of a very rich and very silly man. Eighteen months ago Nikos Alexiou, the Greek immigrant boy who'd grown up to become the founder of the fifth largest aircraft manufacturing company in America, had died at his lavish

manor on the edge of St. Louis County. A series of strokes had partially paralyzed him and confined him to his forty-two-room mansion for the last two years of his life. He had died a sixty-eight-year-old widower, leaving behind him a grown son, Stavros, known as Buddy, and a will that was a masterpiece of ethnic chauvinism. What was left of his \$13,000,000 estate after taxes and expenses had been placed in trust for the benefit of his son, who would receive the income until he turned forty and the principal on his fortieth birthday. But there was a catch. He had to marry by the time he was twenty-eight, and remain married until he was forty, to—and I quote from the will—“a woman of true Greek blood and orthodox religion.”

If he didn't comply, he forfeited all rights under the trust and the money was to be turned over to the Alexiou Aircraft Corporation employees' pension fund. The problem was that no one knew whether Buddy had complied with the condition or not, since he had dropped out of sight five years ago, at age twenty-four, into the drug culture according to rumor. And therein lay the scam.

“You,” I told Cogan, “are going to turn up as Buddy. I've got some pictures of the way he looked before he dropped out, and we can get you to look just like him with the help of an out-of-work movie make-up man I know.”

“Ah, I get it. We find me a Greek belly dancer, go through a quickie marriage, and I claim the trust.” A look of apprehension crept into his features. “But isn't that a hell of a risky game? Suppose the real Buddy shows up with a Greek broad of his own? And how do we backdate the marriage certificate to before the real Buddy's twenty-eighth birthday?”

I bestowed on him a glance of towering disdain. “It's been a year and a half since old Nikos left us,” I pointed out. “It's safe to assume that if Buddy were going to come back he'd have done it by now. And we don't backdate any marriage certificates, because you're not going to get married and you're not going to claim your share directly. We're going to get a lawyer and file suit to set aside that true-Greek-blood clause and give you your share free and clear of the condition. Then we wait for Alexiou Aircraft and the trustee to settle with us out of court for around twenty percent of the estate, which gives us a nice profit and the pension fund a juicy shot in the arm too. We collect one-fifth of the income from the trust till you turn forty—rather till Buddy does—then we take twenty percent of the principal.”

Cogan let out a piercing whistle of awe. "Wow, what a socko scam! But wait, that means you need a lawyer in the picture too, right?"

"We'll get one in St. Louis," I said. "That's where the old man died and where Alexiou Aircraft and the trustee who's handling the estate have their main offices. I'll call the Jock tonight and get a name, then call the lawyer and hire him by phone to start the wheels turning. From the lawyer's point of view it's just a suit to knock out part of a bigoted will."

"You've planned this pretty carefully," Cogan remarked.

"Milo's Maxim #42," I said. "Work it out in your head first and you don't wind up on your butt later."

For the ladies and gentlemen of my profession, Jock Schultz was a human supermarket. He charged outrageously for his services but he earned his money. It has been conservatively estimated that without him half the major scams of the last decade would never have been pulled off. One might say to the Jock, as I did that night: "Jock, I need a lawyer, in the St. Louis area, a solo practitioner, not a member of a big firm. He has to be honest and a crackerjack negotiator, but not a huge financial success. He has to be naive enough so that when I hand him a case he'll look very closely at the legal issue and not too closely at me. I need him by Tuesday." Then the computers in Jock's head would start blipping and in a few days or less he would call back with the answer.

In this case his answer was: "Spencer Bennell. He's close to eighty but still in good shape, plays golf and squash every weekend. Hangs his hat in Clayton which is right outside St. Louis, and ye can twist him around your pinky if ye've a mind to without even breathing hard."

My next request of Ma Bell was for a line to Clayton, Missouri. "Mr. Bennell? Mr. Spencer Bennell?" I gave my voice a querulous rasp which he would remember when we met in person. "This is J. Dennison Dent from San Francisco, I'm with the Institute for Human Dignity. Are you, ah, familiar with the Institute?" I expected a negative answer, even though I had taken the pains several years ago to have it legally established as a not-for-profit corporation. "The Institute is concerned with maintaining the freedom and dignity of the individual against the pressures of a conformist society. We've been asked by a

young man named Stavros Alexiou to defend his freedom and dignity against the will of his late father, Nikos Alexiou, the aircraft manufacturer." I quoted the ethnic restriction in the old bigot's will and orated thunderously on every person's right to marry or not marry as he or she chooses. "Mr. Alexiou is single and wishes to remain so. The Institute does not feel he should therefore have to give up his patrimony and has decided on the basis of your professional reputation to retain you for whatever litigation is needed to overturn that clause in the will." It was one of my noblest speeches, and I barely resisted the urge to pat myself approvingly on the shoulder. Bennell agreed to take the case and I agreed to send him an Institute check that day for his retainer. He would proceed to do the necessary research and Buddy Alexiou and I would fly in for a conference a week from Wednesday.

There were dozens of details to clean up before we flew east. I deposited Cogan in the San Francisco Public Library with instructions to memorize every known fact about the Alexiou family. Each evening I quizzed him intensively and was amazed at his retentive memory. "I was always a quick study," he said modestly. I lined up the make-up man to revise Cogan's face, built a superb file of phony proofs of identity courtesy of my friendly neighborhood document forger, and devoted my spare moments to reading the financial statements of Alexiou Aircraft Corporation, which I learned did a booming business selling planes to foreign governments as well as to the U.S. Air Force and our major domestic airlines.

The four-hour flight on Continental from San Francisco to Lambert International Airport was smooth as a sheet of glass. Our plane, I noticed, had been built by Alexiou. I killed time reading Xerox copies of old newspaper clippings describing how Buddy had stormed out of the Alexiou home in a rage five years ago after a violent quarrel with his father. A friend of the family by the name of Lang had driven him to the airport and no mortal eye had seen him again from that day forward. We rented a Vega at Lambert, took it east along Interstate 70 and settled in at the Chase-Park Plaza in the central west end of St. Louis. That afternoon at 3:30 as per appointment we entered the trim brick office building at the corner of Brentwood and Carondelet in the suburb of Clayton and elevatored ourselves to the third-floor office labelled SPENCER BENNELL, ESQ., COUNSELOR AT LAW.

There I received a rude but delightful shock. Whoever sat behind

the paper-littered desk to which we were ushered most assuredly was not Spencer Bennell.

"Hi," the young lady greeted us cheerily. "I'm Gael Irwin. I work with Spencer. One of his clients had an emergency and Spencer had to go to court so he asked me to see you." She had long dark flowing hair, a perky face and a figure of Playboy-bunny delectability hidden inside one of those expensive pants suits that are tailored to look like a laborer's jeans and work shirt. It took me a few moments before I thought to glance at the framed documents on the wall above her desk and confirm that this bird-bright young lovely actually was a member of the bar. I handed her my Institute for Human Dignity card with "J. Dennison Dent, Assistant Director" printed discreetly in the lower left corner. "You are familiar with the facts of the case?" I asked, practicing my querulous rasp.

Ms. Irwin clapped her hands together in a burst of glee. "They're *great* facts!" she squealed delightedly. "I *love* human dignity cases and I've spent hours and *hours* doing the research for Spencer on your problem." She opened one of the dozens of file folders strewn across her desk top and dug out a sheaf of typed papers. "Here's the memorandum I did. I'll make a copy for you before you go but would you like me to give you a summary?" The eagerness in her voice told me she had become positively entranced with the case, and I decided to make an ally of her by listening attentively to whatever she had to say.

"Well first off, the Constitution is useless. There's nothing in the Bill of Rights that says it's illegal to put a condition in a will that restricts someone's freedom to marry. The courts in Virginia and Pennsylvania have knocked out certain kinds of religious restrictions in wills on grounds of public policy. But the really *neat* argument on your side comes from a line of English cases that hold you can't draft that kind of restriction without making it so vague the courts will refuse to figure out what it means."

"Superb argument," I murmured appreciatively, and Cogan nodded in agreement.

"There's only one thing wrong with it," Ms. Irwin went on. "No American court has bought the argument yet. I want our case to be the one that establishes a great new principle!" She handed Cogan and me thick sheaves of Xerox paper stapled together. "These are copies

of a *fantastic* law journal article called 'Testamentary Conditions: The Principle of Uncertainty and Religion.' They'll tell you everything you ever wanted to know about bigots who write wills."

A quick skimming of the article sent an attack of second thoughts about this scam running through my system, and Cogan in the chair next to me was chewing the end of his mustache diffidently. Without a strong legal theory to attack that restriction, I had no way of forcing the trustee and the Alexiou Aircraft Corporation to the bargaining table. But we were already so deeply committed that I decided we couldn't turn back. And when I remembered how many times I had heard that refrain from defenders of our little adventure in Southeast Asia, I felt more disheartened than ever.

"What do you think we should do?" Cogan asked our attorney in a tone that indicated he didn't think it made much difference what we did.

"Well," she said brightly, "Spencer and I will draw up a petition to set aside the restriction, but before we file suit we'll call the trustee and have a meeting to see if we can settle out of court. If they won't settle we sue and strike a blow for Human Dignity!" Her enthusiasm was infectious, and I would have hired her on the spot as a litigator for the I.H.D. if such an institute had more than a paper existence. Cogan and I left her office assured that our legal destiny was in capable hands.

Now we had to wait, but not for long. The next afternoon Cogan and I returned from lunch to find a note in my message box to call Spencer Bennell. I dashed to the nearest pay phone in the lobby and complied. "Bennell here. Yes, Mr. Dent, sorry I missed you too, but we're making progress. Yes indeed, sir. A meeting has been arranged for 10:00 A.M. Monday at the trustee's office, that's Mr. Lang, in the Boatmen's Bank Building downtown on North Broadway. Edgar Lang Associates."

Which turned out to be a firm of International Business Consultants occupying half the nineteenth floor. From the brochure I read in the discreetly luxurious waiting room I learned that the firm specialized in arranging deals between U.S. corporations and foreign governments, and that Alexiou Aircraft was one of the firm's biggest clients. Edgar Lang's corner suite faced east, with a grand view of the six-hundred-foot-tall Gateway Arch. Edgar Lang himself sat behind his polished walnut fortress of a desk, sporting a pot belly and muttonchop

sidewhiskers that made him look like a villain in a Dickens novel. My seat was one end of a green leather couch, with Gael Irwin nestled delightfully between me and Spencer Bennell who looked incredibly vigorous for a man pushing eighty. Across the room Cogan was leaning forward in his straight chair, carrying on an animated low conversation with the man who ran Alexiou Aircraft, President Basil Johnson, who was tall and pale, and showed streaks of gray at the temples and in his trim little Van Dyke, and twitched a lot. Cogan spun reminiscences about the collegiate vacations he'd spent working for the company, and did it with superb aplomb considering that he'd never seen the other man before in his life. Most of Cogan's patter came, of course, from the dossier on Buddy I had assembled, spiced up with some wild tales of his supposed life after his departure from home five years earlier. The small talk died when Edgar Lang gave a throat-clearing bark like a judge calling for order in the court. In no uncertain terms he told us that his duty was to enforce the trust as his dear old friend Nikos Alexiou had intended and that he would not authorize the release of one cent of the accrued income to Nikos' son since that son had chosen to turn twenty-eight without marrying a proper wife. "The trust is clear," Lang harrumphed. "A woman of true Greek blood and orthodox religion."

"That is about as clear as the muddy Mississippi!" Gael sprang off the couch and into the fray. "Who knows the difference between true Greek blood and false Greek blood? How much does it take to be of true Greek blood? And what's orthodox religion? The will doesn't say Greek Orthodox, it says orthodox. And even if we knew what it meant, who is *of* that religion? Just the people that believe it all literally? Suppose I take some of it as poetry, am I *of* that religion or not? And do you really want a *court* to decide questions like that? For God's sake!" She gave a magnificent performance, mouth wide open, head tossing violently, glaring at the dumbfounded trustee as if never in the history of American law had Right so clearly opposed Wrong.

"It was Mr. Alexiou's property to dispose of as he wished." Dumbfounded Lang may have been, but defeated he was not. "Your client should have found himself a proper wife."

"N-now wait a minute here." Basil Johnson aimed a trembling finger at the walnut fortress. "I thought about this b-before I came here and I agree with B-B-Buddy. The fact that he didn't happen to f-find a Greek

wife who satisfied him doesn't mean he should lose *all* the money. I think he and the corporation can work out a reasonable compromise as to who gets how much."

Lang glared at the stuttering president with icy disregard. "The decision is not yours to make, sir," he said sternly.

"Then he can g-get his lawyer to sue to t-terminate the entire trust. He's entitled to the principal when he turns f-forty but I think he can get it s-sooner. And if he wins, there go your trustees' c-commissions."

This new development scared the socks off me for a moment, but then I realized that if it worked it would actually be an improvement on my original plan, so I beamed contentedly.

"You can all waste your funds as you see fit," Edgar Lang blustered. "You will learn that the courts of this state still respect property rights." And on that sour note Bennell and Gael and Johnson and Cogan and I said perfunctory farewells to Lang and adjourned for lunch and a strategy session at Papa Tosca's, where Cogan continued to pour out a veritable Niagara of completely impromptu tales of his wanderings across America in the past five years. God, he was good. He made me wonder why he'd taken to my profession instead of remaining in the performing arts. He made me just a little envious.

And suddenly, just after Spencer Bennell had agreed to start a lawsuit to terminate the trust, I felt a monstrous twinge inside me, and it wasn't heartburn from the linguini. It was the realization that more than one scam might be in progress around the happy table.

I kept as straight a face as possible and continued my utterly fictitious explanation of IHD's inner workings to an excited Gael Irwin. Finally the party broke up and Cogan and I rode back to the Chase in the rented Vega. Once in the privacy of my room I picked up the phone and put in a feverish call to the Jock, who promised to get back to me in a day or two.

Which from my point of view was a hell of a long wait.

Cogan wanted to find himself a woman the next evening, so I called Bennell's office and invited Gael out to dinner. We tackled the London broil and the superb salad bar at The Leather Bottle in Clayton, and over a succession of after-dinner drinks—myself favoring brandy while she sipped Velvet Hammers—she treated me to a lecture on the premature termination of trusts.

"In England we'd win in a walk. The English courts hold that when you put property in trust for somebody till he's X years old and he gets the principal on his Xth birthday, the beneficiary is really the owner of the property and he can terminate the trust before he turns X and take the property outright. But most American courts take the position that the dead man was the owner of the property and his restrictions have to be respected so the beneficiary can't terminate the trust before the trust instrument says he can. There are a few cases here that follow the English view and I think we have some chance of winning."

"A most instructive exshpo—er, account," I said, "and would you like another Velvet Monkeywrench?"

She made a gracefully clownish face at me. "Oh dear, this doesn't seem to be the night for Human Dignity, does it?"

It certainly didn't. When the phone on my night table at the Chase screamed at me the next morning, it was all I could do to roll to the edge of the bed and grope for the receiver and mutter gibberish into it.

"Mr. Dent?" a voice assaulted my tender ear. "Mr. J. Dennison Dent of the Institute for Human Dignity? The gentleman who came to St. Louis with Buddy Alexiou?"

"Speaking," I snarled.

"You will want to see me," the voice assured me. "I just flew in from Boston and am calling from the airport. The limo will take me about half an hour to get to the Chase."

"Now wait just a minute!" I yelled. "Who the hell do you think you are anyway?"

A knowing chuckle traveled over the wire. "Why, that's an easy one. I'm the real Buddy Alexiou! Thirty minutes." And he hung up with a click that nearly deafened me. The old twinge started bouncing around my innards again, and I forced myself into the hottest followed by the coldest shower I could stand and then into a suit, thinking frantically every second. I grabbed the phone and dialed Cogan's room.

"Milo. Do well last night? Glad to hear it. Now listen carefully. Get dressed, get out of this hotel and stay out all day. Call me before you come back. Go downtown, visit the Arch or take the ride up the river on the *Huck Finn* or something, but don't come near me till further notice. Understood? I'll explain later." That was to insure that the two putative Buddy Alexious didn't accidentally encounter each other. I

had enough catastrophes on my hands already.

Forty minutes later, with the second self-styled Buddy sitting in the wing chair across from me, ankles crossed indolently, I looked up from the papers he had offered me to prove his identity. An old driver's license, social security card, a wallet-sized photo of a younger version of himself and a teen-aged girl standing arm-in-arm on the lawn of what was clearly old Nikos Alexiou's lordly manor—if these were fakes he had a better document forger than my man, and they don't come any better than my man.

"Convinced?" he asked. "Since I'm the real Buddy, Mr. Dent, that means you've been taken in by some con artist posing as me."

"It would seem possible," I replied, cradling my chin judiciously. "I suppose the Institute could have been hoodwinked by an impostor, but we do make careful checks, you know, and we can't be responsible if . . ."

He waved an impatient and well-manicured hand at me. "No, no, I'm not going to make trouble for your Institute. I don't even want to make trouble for the guy who's impersonating me. All I want is for the two of you to keep on with what you're doing, trying to break that trust. If you win, I'll take 75 percent of the proceeds and let the other guy keep the rest."

Bewilderment socked me in the solar plexus, and I clutched the arms of my chair as if the room were swaying. "You just lost me. Are you saying you don't want to appear personally in the case—you want, er, the other claimant to be a sort of proxy for you?"

"That's it." He laughed bitterly for a moment. "I don't want so much as a look at the damned airplane factory. I would have come back sooner to fight Pop's trust but I didn't think the risk was worth it until a contact I still have at the factory called me the other day and said he'd heard Johnson and one of the vice-presidents talking about my being back here and how the company was supporting me in a suit to end the trust. Then I knew I had to come back. You see, that restriction in the trust was why I vanished five years ago. Pop had found out about me."

"I'm lost again. Your father tried to make you marry a woman of true Greek blood and . . ."

"No, no, that blood and religion stuff was just camouflage to keep the real reason hidden. My father tried to make me marry a *woman*."

Sunlight was now beginning to dispel the fog in my head, so that his next statement wasn't necessary.

"I'm gay, you see," he said simply.

It was an eminently believable story, even to the point that he had a high-paying job in Boston under another name which he stood to lose if he came back to St. Louis to fight his father's trust. By the time Buddy Two departed from my princely chamber, my brain seemed to be falling apart. I pulled notepaper out of a bureau drawer, jotted down the hotel and the assumed name my visitor said he would use while in town—Rodeway Inn, James Gilbert—and then just sat there, trying to devise a way to handle this insane situation.

When I'd begun this scam the real Buddy Alexiou had been gone for five years—dead or an amnesia victim for all I knew—and the only contender for the title had been Roy Cogan who of course was a fake. Then, over luncheon at Papa Tosca's, when I'd realized what a consummate job Cogan was doing as Buddy, it had crossed my mind that maybe, just maybe, my phony wasn't a phony at all but the real thing. Could the genuine Buddy Alexiou have somehow gotten the word from the Jock that Milo Turner was looking for a young man of his precise description, and have made the contact with me for the purpose of finding out what I was up to? It sounded absurd, but Cogan had struck me as just too good in the role of Buddy, although I still had no idea what labyrinthine scam of his own he had in mind. The appearance of Buddy Two, however, threw all my theories into chaos, because if he *was* genuine then my man was indeed nothing but the simple fake I'd first thought he was. But if Buddy Two was a phony then Cogan still might be the genuine Buddy Alexiou.

Like a doctor whose patient's symptoms squared with no known disease, I needed a second opinion. Not Cogan's; he was part of the symptoms. Certainly not the opinion of the blustering Edgar Lang nor of the stuttering Basil Johnson. That seemed to leave only Spencer Bennell, and in desperation I dialed his office, confident that I could give him all the facts without revealing my own identity.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Dent," the receptionist said, "but Mr. Bennell had to go to Cape Girardeau to try a case and won't be back till the end of the week. Would you care to speak to Miss Irwin?"

An hour later, on the edge of the client's chair in her file-littered office, I was describing to her my encounter with Buddy Two. When I

had finished my account she played with a strand of her lustrous dark hair and nibbled on her lower lip. Finally she looked me square in the eyeballs and gave her diagnosis.

"It's very simple. There can't be two genuine Buddies. So if Buddy Two is real, the Buddy that went to your Institute for help is a fake. And if your Buddy is genuine, Buddy Two is a fake!"

I nodded at these observations as if they had dropped from the mouth of Socrates.

"So all you have to do is put both of them together in a locked room with two or three people who knew the real Buddy best and have them quiz both of the guys until one or the other gives himself away!"

I could imagine no more horrendous suggestion, because just in case Cogan *was* playing the game straight with me, both he and my original scam would be blown clear out of the water in such a confrontation. But how to veto it without giving myself away? "I'm afraid that is just too likely to be inconclusive," I objected, *shaking my head thoughtfully*. "Suppose some quizzers wound up backing one claimant and others the other?"

"Fingerprints!" Gael shrieked excitedly.

Of course, I had made sure before ever committing myself to the scam that the real Buddy's prints were nowhere spread upon the public record. "I don't think there are any records of Buddy's prints before he left St. Louis," I said, feigning uncertainty.

We sat in silence for a bit, and then she spread out her hands on the desk top. "I'm bankrupt of ideas," she confessed. "I'm sorry, but I can't think of any other way we can tell who's real and who isn't. And when Spencer comes back from Cape Girardeau I'm going to have to tell him that someone's attempting a fraud and I think he's going to have to tell the cops and let them figure it out."

"Hooray for legal ethics," I mumbled, not daring to try and stop her for fear it would blow my cover. I thanked her for her invaluable help, sped back to the Chase and made plans to retrieve Cogan and get us both out of town before we began hearing official knocks on our doors.

There was a message in my box to call Los Angeles. I tore up to my room as if a demon were breathing down the back of my neck and snatched up the phone and dialed. "Jock? Milo. You've got it?"

"I have indeed," Jock said. "And did ye really think I'd send ye a lad that wasn't what he seemed?" He reeled off a litany of names, dates

and places, including several summer stock productions Cogan had played in and two or three jails he'd done time in, a whole spectrum of life experiences that established beyond dispute that Roy Cogan was exactly what he had told me he was, a small-time actor turned con man. I whooshed out a breath of relief that could have broken a window.

"Jock," I said, "you don't know what a favor you've just done me."

"Oh, ye don't think so?" he replied in a tone that left no doubt his bill would be steep. I thanked him profusely, wished the wind at his back on all his journeys, and hung up.

Scratch one irrational suspicion. Roy Cogan was genuine—a genuine fake Buddy Alexiou, that is. He was just so much better at the game than even I had been at his age that subconsciously I must have been resenting him like hell and building up an insane theory against him. Now I had to get hold of him in a hurry and hustle both of us out of St. Louis; but having no idea where he'd gone when I'd called him this morning and told him to dematerialize, I could do little but sit by the phone and wait for him to call. I had to save his skin as well as my own. I owed him that much.

I waited and waited some more, and then when I'd begun to think something had gone wrong with the phone, it rang, and I snatched at it. "Cogan? I . . ."

"No, sweetie, it's me. Who's Cogan?" There was no mistaking the tinkletones of my least favorite kooky woman lawyer. "I called you because a minute ago something just struck me about your two Buddies problem."

"I'm all ears," I lied, wishing she'd get the hell off the line and clear it for Cogan's call.

"Just because one of them has to be a phony," she said, enunciating each word precisely, "that doesn't mean the other one has to be the real thing! Why couldn't they *both* be fakes?"

And as if on cue, I suddenly had what my Zen Buddhist friends would call a *satori*, an overpoweringly enlightening intuitive understanding of the whole ball of wax. It was like that moment in one of my favorite Hitchcock films, *Vertigo*, where James Stewart fastens the necklace around Kim Novak's neck and suddenly understands everything that has happened to him in the picture. I recalled the clippings I'd read on the plane about the circumstances of Buddy's disappear-

ance, and those damnably genuine-looking papers Buddy Two had shown me, and the way he'd known my assumed name and where I was staying when he'd phoned me this morning. And when I put all the pieces together I saw how a second superscam had been going on parallel to my own, and I knew what to do about it.

"Are you still there?" Gael asked in alarm. "And you still haven't told me who Cogan is!"

"Oh, ah, Cogan's the head of the private detective agency the Institute uses to check out people who come to us with cases. I was expecting him to call me so we could go over the check he ran on Buddy One and see if there could have been a slip-up. Thanks for your thought, Gael, I appreciate it more than I can tell you."

The second the call ended I twirled the dial and made one of my own, back to the Jock's human supermarket. "I need a man quick," I said, "and the hell with the cost. Someone here in St. Louis who can tap a phone on short notice with no questions asked." I didn't really need the confirmation the tap would provide but thought it might be useful to have some physical evidence in my back pocket. The Jock gave me a name, telling me the man was an ex-CIA spook who'd been caught with his hand in the till. I called the man and drove out to his office. By the cocktail hour the bug was in place.

I was lucky. My man called me back at 8:30 that night and played me a most revealing conversation he'd picked up, a dialogue that confirmed my intuition of what the caper was all about. "Okay," I told him. "Make me a copy of that and get me a battery recorder to go with it. I'll be over for it in an hour. Kill the tap and have your bill ready. I'll pay in cash." I slammed the phone down, picked it up again and dialed Cogan's room. He'd come in at suppertime and was watching TV now, waiting for action. "Get packed," I told him. "Then get up here and pack my bags, pay our bills, take a cab to the airport and wait. If I'm not there by 2:00 A.M., grab the first flight out and drop a note to the I.H.D. post office address telling me where you've holed up. Got it?"

"Milo, what the hell has been going on around here today?" Cogan demanded irritably.

"Explanations afterward," I promised. "Now move it, unless you want the lead in the next production at the Jefferson City pen." . . .

An hour and a half later, I braked the Vega in the graveled driveway

beside one of the largest houses in the posh and snobby suburb of Crevecoeur, and a few minutes after my arrival I was deep in private conversation with the rather astonished master of the establishment.

"You can't use that in court," Edgar Lang chattered, his teeth tapping against each other in his fright. "Tapes aren't admissible . . ."

"We're not in court. This is just between us." The battery-powered cassette recorder in my lap gave a little click as the tape rewound to its starting point. "Even without the tape it had to be you. Who was the last person to see Buddy alive five years ago? You, who supposedly drove him to the airport. Who had Buddy's genuine ID? Your boy, Buddy Two. You killed your best friend's son five years ago, took his ID, and just waited for old Nikos to die and enough time to pass so that a fake Buddy would pass muster here in St. Louis. Your ringer would come here, sue to end the trust, and you'd wind up with the whole fund minus whatever your Buddy Two's cut was. Nice deal. I have to admit your ringer's a good man; he had me fooled for a few minutes. I may use him myself someday. You must have felt as if the top of your head were coming off at that meeting at your office; you knew the man playing Buddy was a phony, because you'd killed the genuine article five years ago, but you had to go along with the game because your own phony Buddy was waiting in the wings, just about to make his appearance. So you simply had your man make his pitch to me. The fact that Buddy Two knew who I was and where I was staying was another thing that gave you away; only the people at the meeting knew those things. And by the way, where did you bury Buddy's body? If the cops started digging up the gardens around old Alexiou's house, would they find some bones that didn't belong?"

A good shot, that last speculation. Lang fell back in his chair.

"Okay, so what do you want?" he demanded. "You're not a cop . . ."

"Money," I said. "Lots of it, because you've cost me a bunch. Forty thousand would be a reasonable figure, I should think." He turned pale as a daiquiri. "And in cash, and tonight. That shouldn't give you any trouble. As the head of a firm that arranges big business deals with foreign governments, you've got to have a slush fund around."

"I can't get it for you tonight," he protested feebly.

"The police station is always open," I pointed out, fingering my cassette recorder pointedly, "and your conversation with Mr. James Gil-

bert of the Rodeway Inn would be instructive to the bunco squad."

We paid a visit to his squirrel hole that night.

It was a little after 1:30 A.M. when I slid the Vega into one of the return slots for rented cars at Lambert Airport and made tracks for the central lounge. Cogan was waiting in a scooped-out seat. I slipped into the seat beside him and gave him a quick rundown on the action. We decided it would be safe enough to take a direct flight back to California, using one of the credit cards in false names I always carry to pay for our tickets. I had to get back to dismantle the I.H.D. office before the cops began checking into that nonexistent crusader for human dignity known as J. Dennison Dent. I could reorganize the Institute later, under another name and in another state, when the heat died down.

That bright and kooky law lady had cost me one of my best covers, at least temporarily, but somehow I couldn't work up any resentment against her. I wished she were on my side of society's fence; we'd make a great team on a scam. I passed through the security checkpoint with forty thousand dollars spread around various portions of my anatomy, and Cogan and I flew the friendly skies back to safety.

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What a rewarding task it is to mold the young . . .



CLOSED FOR THE SEASON



by
BETT ANDERSON

“Ed,” I said with forced calm, “please let’s stop. I’m getting scared.”

At the moment a faint light appeared ahead. A miracle, for which I gave silent thanks. Now I’m no more nervous than the next woman. Since Ed retired two years ago, we’ve driven from one end of this country to the other in all kinds of weather. But this was something else—the granddaddy of all thunderstorms. To make it worse, I could hear the angry ocean somewhere out there to our right. Fortunately,

there were no other cars on this isolated shore road so we didn't have to worry about drunken drivers.

"O.K., O.K.," my husband said, "calm down. I think that's the old Beach and Bay Hotel up ahead. I've been there once or twice on business. It's probably closed for the season. But if it'll make you feel better, we'll pull in until the worst of this is over."

We didn't pull in; we skidded in.

"Ed, there's someone here. Probably the caretaker. Shall we. . . ?"

He was already out of the car, fighting his way through the downpour. I peered out. What a monstrosity, I thought. The grande dame of all resort hotels—it was curlicued, turreted, and ugly. Gothic in its original intent, it could best be described as Early Charles Addams. Two rocking chairs were responding merrily to the gusts of wind, weaving back and forth like tipsy dowagers. My curiosity got the better of me.

Pulling my raincoat up over my head, I ran to Ed's side just as someone answered the lonely-sounding bell he'd pushed.

It was a girl. The dim light behind her outlined a skinny figure in jeans with a mop of rebellious yellow hair.

She just stood there, silent, behind the locked screen door.

"I know the hotel is closed," Ed said pleasantly, "but would it be possible for my wife and me to come in until the storm is over?"

"We'd be glad to pay for a cup of coffee," I chimed in.

"No," the girl said, ". . . no." She didn't look frightened. She just looked contemptuous of two senior citizens who'd let themselves be caught in such a situation.

"But . . ." Ed started.

He didn't get to finish. A young man suddenly appeared behind the girl.

"What's up?" he asked in a voice hardly more friendly than that of the girl.

Ed explained. "Of course we'd be willing to pay, and well, for any inconvenience to you."

The boy glanced past us at our Cadillac, gleaming wetly and handsomely. He relaxed slightly but still maintained a no-nonsense stance.

Unexpectedly he said, "Come in." He unlocked the rusty door and we stepped into a poorly lit lobby. A fly-specked calendar, designating August, hung askew behind the desk.

"We're closing the place for the season," the boy said. "I'm afraid there's no heat and not many lights. The bulbs are gone. But if you'd like to stay until morning, we could give you plenty of blankets. And maybe Junie could scare up a cup of coffee."

"Sounds like a feast." I hated that over-cordial note in my voice. It meant that I was catering to these disagreeable youngsters who were behaving like Dracula's descendants.

"My name is Artie," the boy said, almost pleasantly, "and this is . . . Junie." Ed and Artie shook hands. Junie said nothing. I had seldom had a more reluctant hostess.

Trying to make friends and influence a sullen stranger, I said, "Don't go to a lot of bother. Just show us to a room, please."

"Junie will give you a candle and take you upstairs. I'll help Mr. . . . ?"

"Thomas, Ed Thomas," my husband said. "Thanks. If you'll just show me where to put the car . . ."

The two men went out into the storm again. I followed the girl down a long, clammy corridor. "We'll have to walk up one flight," she said, "the elevator isn't running."

Her voice seemed to come from nowhere. I swear I don't believe her lips even moved.

The hotel was damp and cold and had the strange odor that places take on when they know they've been deserted. There was another odor, too, which I couldn't place. It was unpleasant: probably a rat that had died of starvation.

The room that Junie led me into looked most uninviting in the flickering light of our candles. She said she'd get some blankets and she did. Finally she closed the door behind her, leaving me marble-cold and miserable. I decided to remove my wet raincoat and snuggle under the blankets in all my clothes.

The sheets were freezing and I lay there, shivering. I couldn't believe it could be this quiet anywhere on earth. Except for the thunder and the rain, there was no sound whatsoever. This old hostelry must be solidly built, I thought. Not like modern motels with their tissue-paper walls and toilets that compete with Niagara Falls every time they're flushed. I dozed off.

I don't know what woke me but it wasn't the storm. It had stopped. Maybe it was the silence which was more ominous than peaceful.

What time was it? How long had I been asleep? I scrambled out of bed and lit the candle. My watch said 3:30. My God, I'd been asleep for hours. Where was Ed? Surely it couldn't take this long to park a car, not even in a wild storm.

Something terrible must have happened. I remembered a look he'd flashed to me just before he'd gone out to put away the car. What had it meant? Certainly it wasn't fear. Ed has never been afraid of anything in his life. He's always cautioning me not to let my imagination run away with me. "Simmer down" is his favorite admonition.

It seemed a good time to start simmering. I'd just go downstairs and find him. He'd probably discovered a flat tire and decided to change it before coming upstairs. Don't be ridiculous, my imagination prodded me, since when does it take over three hours to change a tire? I started to panic.

Then that peculiar, fetid smell wafted past me again. This time it was stronger. Already exhausted from hunger and worry, I stood very still for a moment and made a super effort to gain my equilibrium. I wanted to shout Ed's name as loud as I could. But I had a feeling that such a cry would unleash all sorts of nameless horrors around me.

Suddenly a small lift of air from somewhere blew out my candle. I swallowed a scream. Dear heaven, I thought suddenly, maybe those kids were lying in wait for unsuspecting folks like us. I recalled the boy's face when he first spotted our big car. Executive Special, it seemed to shout. Move over, everybody, we're wealth and luxury and VIP. And, of course, that's just what we were and those kids must have caught the aroma of affluence.

All this time I was moving slowly down the hall. The old-fashioned carpet allowed me to creep along as silently as a ghost. It was a corridor of doors. I could imagine it in season—gay with guests, redolent with the sun and the sea. Now how could I conjure up such a scene of normalcy in this hideous, frowzy old hotel that had been put to sleep for the winter? As Ed says, my imagination will be the death of me . . .

What a thought!

Suddenly I heard a voice but it was so faint that I couldn't tell whether it belonged to a man or a woman. Something in me said "Move!" and I did, back along that endless hall. Way off somewhere I heard a door open. They've killed Ed, I thought, and now they're coming

for me. Panicky, I pushed open the nearest door, almost falling in my haste. My heart sounded like a grandfather's clock. Then the smell in the room hit me full force. It was the smell of death. I grabbed the doorknob to make a quick exit. But, believe it or not, I couldn't go without knowing.

The corpse wasn't hard to find. I tripped over it. I fumbled in my pocket for the lighter which I carry for Ed's occasional pipe. After one look, I hurriedly extinguished the flame. A poor old guy, shabby and thin, with his head bashed in. He'd been dead for days. Waves of nausea rose in me. I stumbled out into the hall.

The stairs, I knew, were to my right. I crept down them, holding on to the banister and trying to hold onto my senses. Every impulse in my body ached for me to run. But—which way?

Then I heard the most welcome sound I'd ever heard in my life. Ed's voice. It was coming from the room off the big dining room. Ed was in the kitchen! I nearly laughed, then sobbed instead. Hysteria shook me.

"Ed," I screamed, "oh, Ed!"

I reached the door just as he opened it. Throwing my arms around him, I cried like a child.

"Oh, Ed, I just saw a body . . ." Then I realized there were other people in the room. The truculent boy and the girl with the daffodil hair. They were trussed, gagged, and expertly tied to two kitchen chairs, back to back, a set of human bookends.

"It seems, my dear," said Ed, "that we have ourselves an amateur Bonnie and Clyde."

"You mean. . . ?"

"Exactly. These two hatched a nice little plot for instant riches. Knowing this hotel was closed for the season, they decided it would make a neat pad while they waited to trap unwary tourists who might wander off the main road. That poor thing upstairs was the caretaker they put to rest last week."

"Let's go," I begged, "let's get out of here."

"Not quite yet," my husband smiled, "I think these kids ought to be taught something about the rudiments of crime, don't you?"

I glanced over at the two aborted criminals, as neatly giftwrapped as a couple of Christmas presents. "Don't you think they've learned their lesson?"

"Perhaps," said Ed, "but I can always teach kids like this a few more things." Since his retirement, Ed has not had many such opportunities. Almost without listening, I heard his nice, friendly, introductory sentence, "Now, remember, kids, I'm doing this for your own good. You've gone about everything the wrong way. But it's not too late. You're nothing to me, Artie, but I sense that you do have possibilities."

When the lecture was over we walked out into the dawn. It was as if the whole world had been washed squeaky clean. We got into our car and rode awhile, each preoccupied with what we'd just been through.

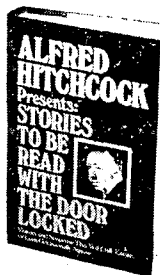
I put my hand on Ed's knee. "Honey, we've been married over twenty years and you still amaze me. Why would you spend all that time on two juvenile delinquents who were out to murder us?"

My husband pondered a minute. "Perhaps because I could see myself in that young punk when I was his age. He's doing everything wrong but I still think he has potential. You see, my love, if he manages to extricate himself and that girl from those ropes and then disposes of that corpse satisfactorily, I have high hopes that someday we might be able to use him in the Syndicate."

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PLASTIQUE

by
**EDWARD D.
HOCH**



Nobody called him the Frenchman in those days because they were all Frenchmen, fighting the invader by darkness and stealth, fighting him in the streets and across the ravaged countryside. While they waited for the American Third Army to sweep down from the Normandy beaches, he learned the craft which was to be his life's work.

It was a British commando, dropped behind the lines to work with the underground, who first taught the eighteen-year-old boy the work-

ings of Composition C-2, a newly developed explosive the Americans were just beginning to produce. C-2 was a mixture of TNT and hexogen, so stable it could be pounded with a hammer, so malleable it could be worked like putty into a thousand different shapes. But once a detonator was inserted into the mass, it became deadly, capable of blasting an enemy train from the tracks or destroying a German command post.

He learned fast and in those closing days of the war he became an expert in the relatively new art of destruction by plastic explosives. The French called C-2 *plastique*, and at the war's end they gave him a medal and took away his supply of it. He was expected to settle down to the peaceful toils of the countryside south of Paris, working in the vineyards or in one of the little factory towns.

But he was barely twenty and instead he went south, shipping out of Marseilles on the regular steamer run that stopped at Majorca and then continued on to Algiers. It was there one hot and dusty afternoon that he met an older man who'd been with him in the underground.

"You are still an expert in *plastique*?" the man asked, sitting opposite him at a little table in a French cafe.

"That was in the war," the Frenchman replied. "I'm finished with killing."

"We need men like you, men who can handle *plastique*."

"Anyone can handle it, with a little training."

"But to shape the charges just so, as you did . . ."

"I was a boy then. I did wild things. I don't want to fight any war in Indochina."

"Not Indochina," the man told him. "Near here—Tunisia."

"Tunisia!"

"It is coming soon. We will need your plastic bombs."

"On whose side?"

He spread his hand across the table, leaving a trail of banknotes. "Does it matter?"

And the Frenchman realized it did not really matter.

He fought under Bourguiba in Tunisia, against his own countrymen, and when that battle was won and the action shifted to Algiers, he went along. It was during the Algiers battle that he met the girl, Marta. She was one of them, half Arab, half Jewish, running messages

between the forces, carrying a gun with the assurance of a seasoned fighting man. By then he was thirty, and she was barely into her twenties, but he knew from others that she would sleep with a man in return for a little kindness.

“You are the one they call the Frenchman,” she said on the day they met.

“There are many Frenchmen opposed to the junta.”

“But you are the one. The *plastique* expert.”

“I have heard much about you too, Marta.”

She must have known what he meant, because she answered with anger, “Have you heard how I lost my parents in the war? Have you heard how the French tortured me? What have you heard, Frenchman?”

She had a rare beauty when angered like that, with pale blue eyes that narrowed to firm tense slits. “We each have our lives, our pasts,” he answered calmly. “There is no need to excite yourself.”

She took a sip of the wine he’d bought her. “I wish I was a man, so I could make bombs too.”

“You do your share, and better than most men I know.”

“How many have you killed, Frenchman?”

“I never think about it. I think about the bombs, not their results.”

“Let me see you do it! Let me attach the detonator with my own hands!”

But he shook his head. “It is too dangerous,” he said simply.

He slept with her that night, and many nights in the months that followed. Sometimes she would be waiting when he returned from a mission, and once she parked her little Volvo within sight of a police station where he’d placed an unusually large quantity of explosives. When he joined her that time, she clung tightly to him and they kissed with passion. They clung together for several minutes, groping in the dark, until the street was lit by a flaming blast that seemed to mushroom upward into the night sky. Then she sighed and released him, and they drove home through the narrow streets of the city.

“You liked that, didn’t you?”

“I liked it,” she agreed. “Come up to my apartment.”

It was something he rarely did just after a mission, but this night he was especially tired.

“All right,” he agreed.

She led him to the place on the outskirts of the native quarter, where he'd been only a few times before. Her apartment was on the second floor, up an ancient flight of stone steps worn deep with the tread of centuries.

"Wait here," she told him, and left him alone in the bed.

He must have dozed, for when he awakened the first light of morning was already visible beyond the eastern horizon. He started to roll out of bed and then realized he was not alone. In the half-light at the foot of the bed a French officer stood, aiming a Sten gun at his naked chest.

"Stay very still," the man told him.

"Where is Marta?"

"Her work is done. She has gone away."

"She betrayed me?" The idea was beyond his comprehension.

"You are the one they call the Frenchman?"

"Go to hell!"

The officer clicked off the safety on his Sten gun. The sound was loud in the quiet room. "I could kill you now and no one would ever question it."

"Why don't you? Isn't that what you came for?"

The officer shook his head and tossed a package of cigarettes onto the bed. "As a matter of fact, I want to make you an offer."

"What sort of offer?" he asked, not touching the cigarettes.

"DeGaulle is about to grant independence to Algeria. When that happens you will be out of a job. I am prepared to offer you work with my organization."

"The French army?"

"Hardly! We are a tightly organized group of nationalists opposed to the independence of Algeria. We intend to fight it by every means possible—by the very terrorist weapons of the Front de Liberation Nationale if necessary."

The Frenchman took a cigarette now. "You want me to join the other side."

"We want you to fight for France, as you did once long ago."

"These days I fight only for money."

"There is that too."

"What about Marta?"

The officer shrugged. "Forget you ever knew her." . . .

Seven months later the Frenchman was in Paris, and a month after that he'd set off his first bomb, at the main post office. Two women were killed and several people were injured. He never saw the officer who'd recruited him again, and the men he worked for in Paris were a motley crowd made up of army people and nebulous foreign mercenaries. One man, who wore a captain's uniform, was constantly addressed as "Colonel," and it was explained that this was to be his rank in the new order of things. The Frenchman merely nodded and collected his pay. It was just a business to him.

On the day of his thirty-fifth birthday he carried a suitcase full of plastic explosives into the Gare de Lyon railway station. He opened the suitcase in the men's room just long enough to extract a glob of *plastique* and pack it beneath one of the sinks. The detonator went in, set to explode in just ten minutes. He had time to place two other bombs in the terminal before the sound of the first blast threw the place into a panic. He mingled with the terrified travelers for a time, rushing with them and managing to reach the street just as the second explosion went off.

But Paris did not hold the joys it once had. With the work of the terrorists it had become a city of fear, and the fact that he was one of them did little to break his mood of depression. It was as if he led two lives, and in the mornings he was as chilled as anyone by the newspapers' graphic accounts of the latest outrages.

When the terror finally ended with the arrest of the Colonel and several others in a midtown apartment, he sighed with relief and caught the first plane to America. There was nothing for him in Paris any more, except perhaps a prison cell if the Colonel talked.

In America, a whole new world was waiting.

The man in the back of the candy store eyed him up and down for a full minute before speaking. Then he said, "You talk English pretty good for a Frenchman."

"I learned it from British-commandoes during the war."

"They taught you some other stuff too, huh?"

"Yes."

The man nodded as if satisfied. He was large, with an obscene stomach that rolled from side to side when he walked. "All right, here's the deal. We're after supermarkets in certain shopping centers

on Long Island. We want fifty thousand dollars from each of them or the stores get blown up. Understand?"

"I think so."

"We'll have to set off at least one bomb, to show them we mean business. Any problem?"

"No."

"They say you're good."

"I'm good," the Frenchman agreed. "Do you want it at night or during the day?"

"At night. Pick a place that's not too crowded. We don't want a massacre, we just want to scare them into paying."

The Frenchman nodded. "How much do I get?"

"A thousand for the first job. Maybe more later."

That night he drove out to a vast shopping center near Garden City. It was a simple job and he was home in bed before midnight. No one was killed, but one woman had a leg blown off. The supermarket chain paid up, and there was no need for more bombings. The Frenchman was unemployed once more.

The next man who sought him out was tall and dignified, with an air of gentle manners about him. He carried a gold-headed cane and his suit was a bit too lightweight for New York in autumn. "I understand you're called the Frenchman," he said, resting his wrinkled hands on the top of the cane.

"That's right."

"Your work is highly recommended."

The Frenchman nodded. He'd heard it all before. "What's the job?"

The gentleman sighed and glanced down at his hands. "I come from a little town in the South, a long way from here. I want you to blow up a building there—a church." The Frenchman said nothing and the man hurried on. "It's not really a church any more—just a building that's being used by northern agitators."

The Frenchman shrugged. "It's just another job to me."

"Your travel expenses and five thousand dollars?"

They shook hands and the southern gentleman gave him the details. In the morning the Frenchman was on a plane heading south with ten pounds of plastic explosive in his suitcase.

When he reached it, the town looked sleepy and dusty in the noon-

day sun. He noticed at once that a number of city cars seemed to be parked around the town's only hotel. He parked his rented vehicle next to a restaurant with greasy front windows and walked across the street with his bag. One more city visitor wouldn't be noticed.

That was when he recognized Marta.

She was standing on the front steps of the hotel, talking with a group of men, and he thought for a moment she'd forgotten him. But then he heard her voice behind him saying, very softly, "Hello, Frenchman."

"I thought you were dead," he told her.

"That was in another war," she said. "And besides, only the good die young."

"The government rounded up all the O.A.S. people."

"The leaders only. Not the little ones like me."

He glanced around the crowded porch. "Who are all these people?"

"Reporters and television newsmen, mostly, down from New York and Washington. There's been some civil rights trouble here, you know."

"And you?"

She smiled. "I'm the American correspondent for *Leco Graphique*, a French news service. A long way from Algiers, yes?"

"Come up to my room when I'm registered. I'll give you the number."

Some minutes later she arrived, and he unpacked a pint of Scotch from his suitcase. She was wearing an expensive tailored suit that must have come from Paris, and a jeweled bracelet that caught the light when she reached for a cigarette. She had no connection in his mind with the Algerian girl who'd worked for the O.A.S.

"Tell me about it," he said, pouring Scotch into two water glasses. "You've changed since I knew you."

"The man in my apartment that night—Captain Lecock. He took me to Paris and dressed me in the finest clothes. He made a lady out of me."

"Where is he now?"

"He killed himself with his army revolver on the night they came to arrest him. After that I had to go to work, and I landed this job with the news service."

"And you're down here covering this civil rights thing?"

"Yes."

"Have you been here long?"

"Two days. What are you doing here?"

He walked to the window and gazed down at a cruising police car. "I'm a salesman."

"Oh?" She glanced at the closed suitcase. "Of *plastique*?"

"That was long ago." He sat on the edge of the bed and sipped his drink. "Tell me what's been happening here."

"People from the North come here to work among the Negroes. They meet in an old Baptist church outside of town. Last week a local cotton farmer tried to blow up the church, but the bomb went off too soon and he lost his hands."

The Frenchman nodded. "Explosives are always dangerous."

"They've brought you in for it, haven't they?"

"Does it matter? Are these your people, suddenly?"

"No, it doesn't matter—only that there's a story in it for me. Are you being well paid?"

"Better than the last job."

"When will you do it?"

"That doesn't concern you."

For a time she sipped her drink in silence. "We have both come a long way since Algiers," she said finally.

"Yes."

"I will see you again before you leave, Frenchman."

"Perhaps."

She paused at the door and stared back at him. "*Plastique*. Maybe it is you and not the explosive that is *plastique*, able to be molded to any cause for a few dollars."

After she'd gone he remained seated on the bed. Presently the telephone rang and it was the man with the gold-headed cane. "Is everything set?"

"Yes. When do I get the rest of the money?"

"I'll send a man to you. Don't come out here."

The Frenchman hung up the phone and went over to his suitcase. He carefully unwrapped the ten pounds of plastic explosive and began to knead it as one would bread dough. He'd lived nearly twenty years of his life with this gray destruction and he knew it like the palm of his hand.

He remembered what she'd said, and knew it might be true. He *was*

like *plastique*, working now for the French and then against them, now against the army and then for it. Working for an American gangster and a southern bigot. Whoever wanted him, whoever paid.

And who would pay next, after this job?

That night a man came to his room and handed him an envelope. No words were spoken. None were needed. The Frenchman counted out the bills and hid them away. He was ready to go to work.

He drove out of town in the rented car and followed the directions that had been given him. It was after ten when he finally saw the old church building outlined against the night sky. There would be guards, of course, after the earlier attempt. He parked some distance down the road and went the rest of the way on foot. The ten pounds of explosive had been molded to his body and the detonators were safely in his pocket. He had done it like that many times before.

As he approached through the underbrush, he could hear the sound of singing within the church. He slowed down, studying the area and the parked cars along the road. There would be more casualties than he'd planned on.

"Frenchman!"

He recognized the voice. "What are you doing out here?"

"Frenchman, listen! I thought this one was no different, but it is! There are a hundred people in that church, young people mostly. It's not like Algeria or even Paris!"

"It's the same," he said, not really believing it.

"No, it isn't! I've told them, Frenchman. I've told them to expect you."

He didn't know whether to believe her. He looked again through the darkness at the church, at the lighted windows and the cars on the road. There were no police in sight. "I don't think so," he said.

"Frenchman! They'll cut you down with shotguns!"

"I have a job to do." He shook off her hand, pushed her away.

"Is it worth your death? You have the money, don't you? Run—run away!"

He took a deep breath. Certainly he owed nothing to the man with the gold-headed cane, as he'd owed nothing to his previous employers. His hand dropped to his pocket, fingering the detonators. Then he pushed her aside and started running toward the church.

"Frenchman!"

He ignored her and kept running, going around the back of the building, trotting through the tall grass, opening his shirt as he went, working the kneaded *plastique* from his body. The singing from inside was very loud now.

Then it was in his hands—ten pounds of explosives—and he bent to place it against the foundation, in exactly the right place.

There was a noise behind him and he turned to stare into the muzzle of a double-barreled shotgun. The man holding it was smiling, and the Frenchman could see the sparkle of his badge in the light from the church windows.

They held their positions, frozen there, for what seemed a lifetime. Then at last the deputy spoke, lowering the shotgun until it pointed at the ground. "Go ahead, do it," he said softly. "I won't stop you. None of us will."

The Frenchman sighed and tried to move. His legs were very stiff, as if he'd suddenly grown old. He thought of Marta, waiting back there among the weeds, certain she'd betrayed him.

And then he clutched the mass of *plastique* to his chest and started to run, a stumbling uncertain run with no goal in sight. He was running from a German patrol, and a French tank, and a Manhattan police car, and from all the madness in the world.

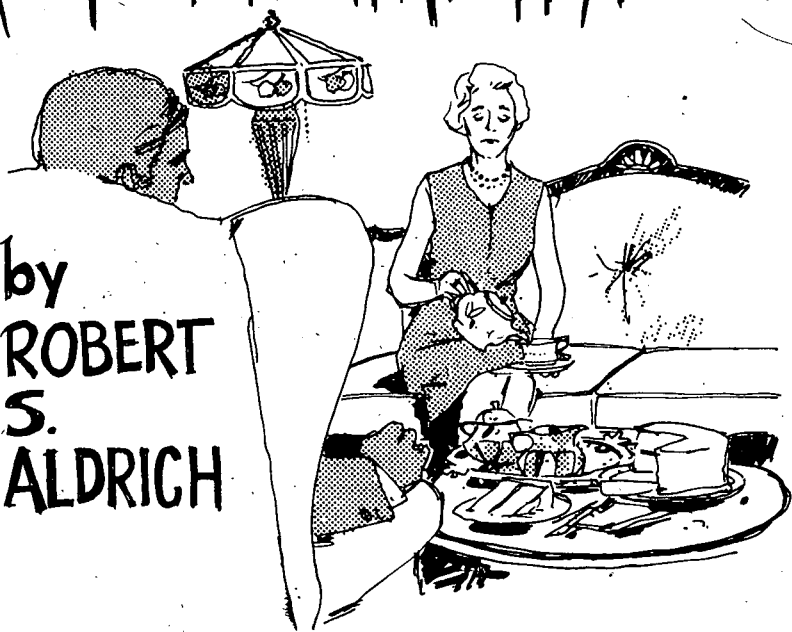
He was running when the shotgun roared behind him.



Perhaps conscience and cowardice are really the same thing . . .

A CUP OF HERBAL TEA

by
**ROBERT
S.
ALDRICH**



Herbert Jenkins grumbled to himself as he drove his car up the steep, rain-splashed road to the summit of Hermitage Hill. There was a break in the storm just now but the sun was still shrouded by heavy, dark clouds. He was a fool, he thought, to respond to the old lady's invitation on a wretched day like this. If the river rose any higher, he would have a hard time getting back over the old bridge; he'd have to drive miles out of his way. There was a pile of work on his desk in his law

office. She would probably keep him all afternoon with a lot of silly chatter.

Still, he reasoned, the visit had to be made. She was powerless to do anything legally now, of course, despite that young fellow she'd got hold of, fresh out of law school. Sam Cowdrey. A lot he could do for her! No, there wasn't a thing to worry about as far as the courts were concerned. But a nuisance suit would be a waste of time, and there would be the publicity. It would be better to try and get on with her. Offer her a few more token shares, perhaps.

Esther Bowen was the widow of the late Paul Bowen, an amateur and entirely self-educated inventor who called himself a chemist. Bowen had been unsuccessful most of his life. And then, past sixty, he had come up with a soft-drink formula. He had bottled it to sell locally and it had proved popular. The Brite-Joos Company had turned into a profitable bonanza—for awhile, anyway. Then Bowen had overextended his credit in a flurry of reckless expansion. The bank had refused to renew his loans and had threatened foreclosure. Creditors began yammering at his door at the same time competitors were moving in, cutting sales. One mistake led to another until bankruptcy seemed the only way out.

That was when Herbert Jenkins had stepped in. Carefully sizing up Bowen's situation, he'd made his plans with his usual thoroughness. Before saying a word to Bowen, he had made a connection with North-east Beverages, lining up a deal for them to take over Brite-Joos. He'd had to lie a little, pretending he held an interest in the firm, though at the time he didn't own a single share. Then, with a merely provisional deal in his shabby briefcase, he'd approached Bowen with an offer.

"You've got two courses open," he told the beleaguered man, after reviewing every detail of his business affairs. "Either you file for bankruptcy or you can sell out for what you can get." Then he outlined his plan. He would pay off the major creditors in return for control of the stock. Bowen would keep a minimum number of shares. He had thrown in the meaningless title of board chairman as a sop to the old man's pride. Jenkins laughed to himself afterward whenever he thought about it. He'd done a real selling job. Bowen had held out for awhile. Jenkins turned the screws. He hinted, without quite saying so, that the creditors were behind him, that unless Bowen gave in, they would close on him the next day.

Jenkins remembered with pleasure the moment when, with tears brimming his rheumy eyes, Bowen had at last reached for a pen and scrawled his signature on the closing agreement, his fingers pushing the pen falteringly, as if it were a great effort to sign away the business into which he had poured his life and hopes. That childlike scrawl fulfilled the dream of months for the scheming attorney.

As soon as he had ownership of the firm in his name, he had turned around and sold out to Northeast, giving him enough to pay off his loans, satisfy the creditors, and leave himself a whopping profit. It just showed what a man could do if he understood human nature. Most men were fools. You could twist them around your finger if you knew how to handle them.

Well, he thought, the old lady is a mere detail. Still grieving, no doubt, over her dead husband. A few days after Jenkins pulled off his coup, Bowen was found in his car, inside his garage, the motor running and the door openings stuffed with rags. The note beside him didn't mention Herbert Jenkins. It held a few scrawled lines, in that childish writing, about what a failure he had been and how he hoped his poor wife would forgive him for taking his life.

The suicide caused quite a stir in the town. It was a relief to Jenkins. Saved him a lot of trouble. As he had expected, Bowen had been having second thoughts. No doubt he had begun to regret signing that agreement. It would have been most unfortunate if he had brought suit. Jenkins's part in the Northeast deal would have furnished ammunition to his enemies, even the threat of disbarment. Well, that was all over now.

The old woman didn't know anything about business. She probably figured her husband had been cheated, but there wasn't a thing she could do about it. She'd been talking to Sam Cowdrey. Well, he'd have to stroke her a little, maybe offer a few extra shares out of the Northeast stock he'd kept, though it hurt to think of being so generous. He'd see. One step at a time.

The old, two-story Victorian house looked huddled and forlorn in the rain. Jenkins pulled the collar of his raincoat around his neck and hurried up the steps. He rang the bell.

Mrs. Bowen, slender, white-haired, slightly stooped, appeared at once. "Why, Mr. Jenkins," she said, "how nice of you to come out in this storm. Do come right in."

He murmured a few polite greetings. There was a fire blazing in the living room. The doors to the dining room were closed. Heavy curtains were drawn over the windows, as if to keep out non-existent sunlight. Tiffany lamps spread pools of yellowish light on the once-rich carpets.

"Well, Mrs. Bowen, how have you been?" he asked with forced heartiness, warming his hands over the fire.

"Quite well, thank you, considering everything. My husband's passing was a terrible shock."

"Of course, I understand. Well, you seem to be living quite comfortably."

"And the manner of his death," Mrs. Bowen said. "It was so unlike him. He always spoke of people who took their own lives as weak and sinful. I have never been able to convince myself that he would do such a terrible thing."

"Yes. But you mustn't let yourself dwell on it too much, Mrs. Bowen. No doubt he was ill."

She shook her head. "He was heartbroken, Mr. Jenkins. He had poured all his energy into his business. And to lose it all so suddenly. He felt he had been betrayed."

"These things happen all the time in business," Jenkins said smoothly. "Things go wrong somewhere along the line. It wasn't your husband's fault. It just happened."

Mrs. Bowen arose from her chair and poked at the fire. "I was in a position to learn a good deal about the business, Mr. Jenkins. From what Paul told me before his death, I know it didn't 'just happen.' It's true the company was in trouble, but he was pushed into selling out for a mere fraction of its true worth." Her face was flushed, though whether from the fire or from her emotion he could not tell, as she turned to him. "You must admit that you profited very handsomely."

He smiled consolingly. "Business, Mrs. Bowen, just business. You mustn't take it as something personal. After all, you have your Northeast stock. The dividends must bring you a fair little income."

"Very little, I'm afraid. It's increasingly hard to meet my bills."

He tried to switch the subject. "Too bad about this filthy weather. I'd have liked to see your garden. I understand you have a very beautiful one."

"Yes, I have. I must show it to you one day when the weather is fine. Unfortunately, we've had trouble with moles rooting up the flowers. My gardener Amos and I have tried traps but there are too many of them."

"Moles? I know a man who got rid of moles by burying empty bottles in his garden, with the necks sticking up above the ground. He says the wind whistles through the bottles. The moles feel the vibration underground and it drives them off."

"Amos thinks there's only one sure way to get rid of them," said Mrs. Bowen. "By poisoning them. It sounds dreadful, doesn't it? I dislike killing any animal, but it seems it must be done or my lovely garden will be ruined. Saturday he went to the store and brought back a bottle of arsenic. It's in the storeroom now."

"I see."

"Amos is going to use it as soon as the ground is dry enough. Meantime, the bottle sits there. It gives me a peculiar feeling whenever I look at it." She clapped a wrinkled hand to her cheek. "Dear, I'm being a poor hostess. You would like a cup of tea, wouldn't you?"

"That would be very nice," he assured her.

"It's herbal tea," she said. "I hope you will like it. There's nothing like a good strong cup of herbal tea, especially in this weather. It has an unfamiliar taste to some people."

"I'm sure it will be fine."

Waiting for her to return from the kitchen, Jenkins wondered why she had bothered to ask him all the way out here. Probably she thought her poverty would stir his sympathy. His watch said three. He'd have to make some excuse to cut the visit short. But, first, he'd get in a few questions concerning Sam Cowdrey.

He was pondering how to put his questions when Mrs. Bowen returned. She was pushing a little wheeled cart on which were a large teapot, cups, a marbled cake, and cookies. Jenkins suppressed a sigh. "Let me help you," he said.

"In better days we had a maid to do these things," Mrs. Bowen said, when they were again seated. "But since the failure of the business—well, one must make do. I can't help but recall how contented and happy Mr. Bowen and I were, looking forward to a comfortable old age together. I never foresaw being alone, with barely enough to live on."

Jenkins cleared his throat, in which a crumb had lodged. "I was

thinking, Mrs. Bowen, I want you to feel satisfied with the arrangements I made with Mr. Bowen. If you have any questions, I hope you will bring them to my attention. There's no need for you to turn to anyone else for advice. Some of these young lawyers lack experience."

She was smiling vaguely. "I already have an attorney," she said. "Mr. Cowdrey gives me all the help I need. I think he may want to discuss some things with you."

He tried to hide his discomfort. "Surely there's no question about the way the company's affairs were settled. Everything was done quite properly, I assure you."

"The legal fine points are over my head, Mr. Jenkins, but I gather that if it can be shown that my husband was coerced in some way, the courts might set the agreement aside."

"Coerced?" Jenkins found it hard to swallow. "There was nothing like that. All the details were put before him. His decision was made of his own free will. I am afraid you are being badly advised. A suit of that kind would stand no chance."

She looked worried. "Sam Cowdrey is a smart young man."

"A suit would only stir up unpleasant publicity, Mrs. Bowen. I'm sure you wouldn't like that."

"Yes," she said, nodding. "I've felt all along that there must be a better way."

Jenkins took another sip of tea, then did a double-take. Better way? What did she mean?

"Lawsuits are so long and dragged out," she said, sipping her own tea. "Mr. Bowen always said that if you had to settle something unpleasant, it should be done as quickly and painlessly as possible. I've thought about that a good deal." She smiled. "Do you like my tea?"

"Fine, just fine." He was puzzled. Was she hinting at something?

"Once," said Mrs. Bowen, "our old dog Rolf was very sick. It was obvious that he would have to be put out of the way. Mr. Bowen was fond of Rolf but he did not hesitate."

"What did he do?"

"He fed him some poison," said Mrs. Bowen. "Arsenic, I believe."

Jenkins nodded vaguely. "I really ought to be going," he said. "The wind seems to be getting fiercer."

"The wind is always so destructive to my garden," Mrs. Bowen said. "Whipping the heads off the flowers and scattering limbs and leaves."

And the moles have been so bad this summer. Amos assures me that they will not suffer for long. Arsenic is very powerful and acts quite suddenly."

In the pause that followed he could hear the ticking of the mantel clock. She seemed obsessed with the subject of arsenic. He drained the last of his tea.

"I'm afraid it took my husband longer to die," said Mrs. Bowen. "I suppose his death was quite painless. Death by poisoning must be hard to endure. But I expect I am depressing you, talking of poison." She put her cup down. "Now, I should like to tell you something that only one or two others besides myself know. It concerns a secret that Mr. Bowen kept all his life. He . . ." She raised up. "Why, Mr. Jenkins, is anything wrong? Are you ill?"

What was wrong was that Jenkins had just had a thought, a terrible thought: Until this moment, his agile mind had not connected the two things, the odd-tasting tea in his cup and the bottle of arsenic in the storeroom. But she couldn't have!

Yes she could! *She had planned this all along.*

His hand darted to his throat. He half rose from his chair and fell back with a frightened groan. Unable to speak aloud, he uttered tormented sounds.

"You must have a bit of cake in your windpipe," Mrs. Bowen said calmly. "Take a deep breath and try to relax."

"Arsen . . . arsenic!" He tried to shout but it was only a whisper. "Help me!" But apparently Mrs. Bowen did not hear.

"As I started to say, Mr. Bowen had very little schooling. He was left an orphan and he had to make his way in the world early in life."

Jenkins did not hear her. He felt a burning in his stomach. The lights from the Tiffany lamps seemed to grow dimmer. He was badly frightened. How could she sit there, calmly talking, savoring her revenge, waiting for him to die? She must be mad. With an effort he struggled to his feet. "Please, Mrs. Bowen," he said throatily. "Telephone for a doctor! An ambulance! I must get to the hospital before it's too late!"

"Too late, Mr. Jenkins?" There was a faint smile on her lips. "It was too late for poor Mr. Bowen when he lay in his car with the motor running."

"It's not my fault that he killed himself!"

"Do you admit that you used him badly? Do you confess here and now that you tricked him, taking advantage of his ignorance?"

"All right, yes, yes! If you're dissatisfied, I'll . . . I'll make it up to you! I'll give you all my Northeast stock! Only don't waste time. Help me!"

She was getting up slowly, so slowly. She was looking down at him with no pity in her pale face. "The note the police found. You wrote it yourself. You imitated his writing, from his signature. Then you murdered him."

"No!" But every moment was precious. "Yes! I knocked him out with a wrench. I . . . I had to. He was suspicious, threatening. Yes, I'll confess everything, *only get help!*"

She had no witness. He would deny it later . . . if he lived.

"Get up, Mr. Jenkins. You look so foolish. I put nothing in your tea. You have not been poisoned."

"What?" He struggled to his feet, feeling the overwhelming shock of release, and with it anger. He had been made a fool. "You tricked me," he rasped. "I have admitted nothing . . . nothing! I will deny everything. They'll never believe you. They can prove nothing!"

"His signature, Mr. Jenkins, it was all that my husband *could* write. He never learned to read."

He stared at her. "Impossible. How could he conduct his business?"

"I helped him. I tried to warn him against your offer but he wouldn't listen. When the police showed me the note, I knew he had been murdered. I did not tell them he was illiterate. I had sworn to keep his secret. You were the only one who had anything to gain by his death."

He had regained his calm. Shrewdly he calculated his chances. No one had seen him coming here. He took a step toward her. It would take only a hard squeeze around her scrawny throat.

"It didn't matter to me that he couldn't read. We loved each other. You wouldn't understand, Mr. Jenkins, for you have never loved anyone but yourself."

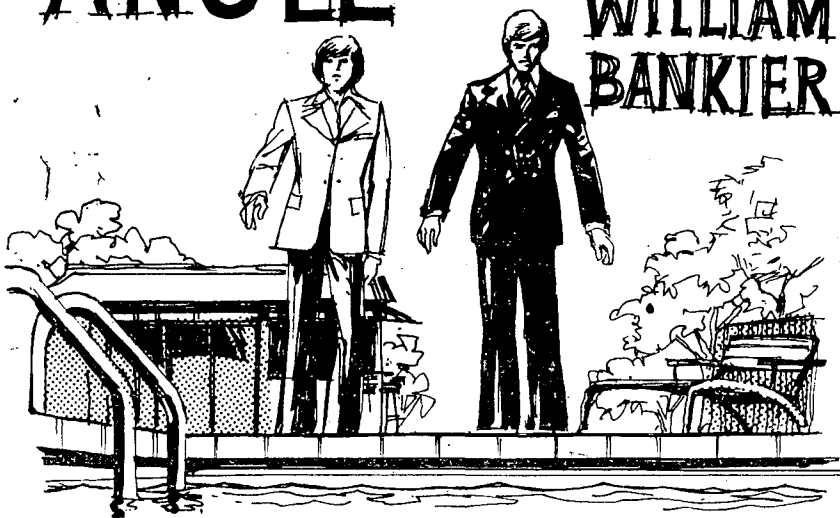
Another step and it would all be over.

He whirled around as the dining-room doors slid open. Sam Cowdrey and Police Chief Bennett came toward him and halted. For one moment all four stood motionless while the rain pounded at the windows and the wind howled around the eaves.

Every man hath a good and a bad one . . .

TO KILL AN ANGEL

by
**WILLIAM
BANKIER**



I remember the day the letter arrived and things started happening. I rode up on the escalator from the Peel Street Metro station and walked a block to the club on Stanley Street. The place was almost empty at eleven-thirty in the morning. Jonathan Fitzwilliam, the owner, known to most of us as Johnny Fist, was holding a crumpled sheet of note paper, squinting at whatever was written on it.

The Ninety-Seven Club is lit by small lamps on oak tables beside

upholstered chairs. Floor-to-ceiling bookshelves cover every wall. There are books stacked on the carpet, books piled on the mahogany bar and a few standing between the liquor bottles on the mirrored shelves. Many of them lay open. You can walk into The Ninety-Seven and find yourself first intrigued, then trapped, by a different book every day. Johnny Fist thinks this is a good thing.

Correction: you can't just walk into The Ninety-Seven. The club has a private membership which Johnny keeps to 100. His accountant, Mervin Stein, says this is bad business but Johnny says he wants room to breathe.

My name is Dennis Masterson. I am a professional singer with a half-hour radio show three days a week on the CBC, and I like to think of myself as Jonathan Fitzwilliam's best friend.

When I walked into the club, Johnny looked up from reading a paper in his hands, peering at me through lamplight. "Milligan is dead. Did you hear?"

"Yes. Killed by some dumb cop in New Orleans."

"Don't blame the cop. Milligan was running with a nasty pair." Johnny lowered this note that seemed to have him puzzled, forgetting it while he considered how our old friend had been conned. "They left a dead body in his bedroom."

"Well," I said, "there goes the ball team."

Milligan was a former pro baseball player who ran a restaurant on Ste. Catherine Street. The restaurant sponsored a team in the Snowdon Fastball League and a few of us used to have some fun on summer evenings, behaving gloriously on the diamond and then going and hoisting a lot of draft beer at the Texas Tavern.

But not any more.

I sniffed the air. "What's on for lunch?"

"Beef curry. Spinach pie."

Dallas came in from the supply room and struggled behind the bar with three cases of beer stacked in front of him. I moved onto one of the upholstered stools where I could relax and watch him work. "Hey," I said, "if you get a minute, you might open me a cold Guinness."

Dallas did, and as he poured the black beer, frowning below the headband that held back his thick blond hair, he said, "How about settling up your tab?"

"I'll clear it on Monday," I said, sipping my beer and wiping my

upper lip. "I have a check coming for a couple of commercials."

Singing commercial music tracks was how I happened to meet Johnny Fist in the first place. A few years back, Johnny was the most popular English radio voice in Montreal. He got called on frequently by the ad agencies to do announcer tracks. So we showed up in the same studio quite often and we soon discovered we laughed at the same things.

So we ended up more than once around the same tavern table. One of these times Milligan joined us and graciously, or perhaps drunkenly, invited me to join the fastball team. I went along and booted a few easy chances at second base, absorbing the razzing, accepting the demotion to right field where I could do less harm. And all the time, Jonathan and I drifted closer together.

This was before the catastrophe that turned him upside down and almost buried him. In those days, Johnny had a wife and son, so part of our time together was spent in his apartment watching the golden girl spoon cereal into the golden baby while we sat at the kitchen table and played cribbage.

But I had better keep my mind on this story. It is too easy to slip back into what used to be with me and Johnny, which is not what is today.

I took my beer over to where he was tapping the sheet of note paper against his teeth and blowing across it with a rhythmic buzz like a Walt Disney bee.

"What is that thing you're playing with?"

"Something very sad," he said, handing it to me. "And maybe dangerous."

It was a message scrawled in red pencil in the largest hand I have ever seen. I read the note twice.

"Dear Jonathan, For the sake of past friendship be my guide and help me perform the Lord's work. Let not the guilty go unpunished. The man's name is Sieberling, or maybe Emery Disco, and he lives somewhere in Montreal. With God's help, I will bring this evil-doer to justice. First we find him. Then we do what must be done.

Don Cleary."

I handed the note back to Johnny. "Sounds like a religious nut. Where do you find your friends?"

Johnny did not smile. He held up a torn envelope. "According to the postmark, this was mailed in Baytown over a week ago. The address isn't accurate so delivery was held up. Cleary may be in Montreal right now."

"Then he'll contact you."

"He may have tried while I was away. Dallas said there were a couple of phone calls but the guy wouldn't leave his name."

I thought about the name in the note—Emery Disco. It rang a bell. "Isn't Disco a member of the club?"

"That's right."

"How does your friend know that?"

"He doesn't. He just wants me to help locate the man. He assumes Disco is in hiding and he figures I know my way around Montreal."

"Sounds like a spy story."

"It's no joke. Disco did something to Cleary years ago." A key turned in the front door lock and a wedge of noonday sun clanged in. The luncheon crowd was beginning to arrive.

"We should have food, landlord, and fine wine." It was that manic, six-foot redhead, Noble Kingbright, come over from the agency with Linda Lennox. And he was in full cry, green eyes glittering, both rows of teeth unsheathed, heels pounding the floor, little Linda propelled along like a marionette at the end of one of his rangy arms.

"I'll tell you later about Cleary," Johnny said. "And remind me to telephone Disco and warn him."

Johnny confronted the newcomers and took Linda away from Kingbright, lifting her like a doll. Big as Kingbright is, he had to look up to my friend Jonathan.

Linda and Johnny had been seeing each other for several months. She had come from Alabama a year before, following her boy friend who was evading military service. Linda is an advertising writer, one of the good ones, and she soon found a job at Parenti Agency where she makes a lot of bread. Her American friend, whose name I could never remember, was a dour stud hiding his light under a bushel of hair but he must have had something because Linda is no fool. Anyway, he decided to split and fly to Denmark but Linda liked the way Montreal was falling into line for her, so they parted his beard and kissed good-bye.

Enter Johnny Fist who saw something fine in the Lennox girl, sitting

by herself nights at his bar, drinking sour mash bourbon and taking down the right books from the musty shelves. Maybe he always wanted a girl one quarter his size. Anyway, soon she was climbing the winding stairs to Johnny's apartment after The Ninety-Seven closed for the night. And our cribbage games became less frequent.

Now Johnny said, without looking at Kingbright, "Keep your hands off my woman, you red-headed, alien sonofabitch, or I'll punch large holes in your body."

He steered both of them to a table and said, "Sit here, have a drink on me, then have lunch on you. I recommend the spinach pie." And he was off towards the kitchen, glancing once again at Cleary's erratic note, folding it, tucking it into his back pocket.

Linda said to me, "Sit down, Denny. Have a bite of lunch with us."

I was not anxious to eat with these two. I liked Linda Lennox but her companion put me on edge so I said, "Save me a place, Lindy. I have to settle up with Dallas." I went to where the bar angles out of sight of the main room behind an island bookshelf and called Dallas over.

"Got another Guinness back there?"

He fished one out of the cooler. "What's the matter with Johnny this morning?"

"Is something the matter?"

"The mail came and he opened this letter and got all edgy. Last time I saw a guy that nervous, it was alimony payments."

"It's a note from some old buddy back in Baytown. The way it's written he seems to be around the bend. I suppose Johnny is worried the guy is going to show up."

"That's all we need in this place, another screwball." Dallas looked out into the clubroom. From where he was standing he could see Linda's table and just then we heard Kingbright let go with one of his maniacal laughs.

"Beautiful," he boomed, using all ten cubic feet of chest capacity, "the gun becomes the hero! We build the whole film around the gun."

I could hear Linda trying to hush the man, to bring him back down to the tone of the room.

At this point, perhaps I should explain how Jonathan Fitzwilliam became financially independent. It was three years ago. Johnny's wife and baby were off to Winnipeg to spend a few days with her mother. I drove the car that took all four of us out to Dorval and I stood with

Johnny at the gate as we waved them aboard the plane. I can still see those golden heads moving up the stairs in the jostling crowd, and I can feel the empty silence we took back with us to the car.

"Hey," I remember saying, "we're a couple of reckless young bachelors for the next few days."

Johnny did a high kick with one leg in the direction we were heading, hunching his shoulders and flapping his hands. "Which way to the vaudeville show?" he cried.

We heard the news bulletin on the car radio as we neared Montreal. The airplane had gone into a hillside five minutes after takeoff. I wanted to turn around and head back to Dorval but Johnny kept me heading straight. He was like a closed door.

"She's dead," he said. "They're both dead."

We went to the radio station and watched the Telex and he was right, they were all dead, everybody aboard the airplane. Johnny's fellow workers whispered around, some of them coming to him in tears, and through it all he was like the crown of an iceberg floating in a dead calm sea.

That's how he remained when he learned she had taken out two life insurance policies, each one worth a hundred thousand dollars. The company paid and the money went into the bank and Jonathan did not refer to it.

Then one day he came into the studio at six o'clock to do his morning show. He had a Church of England hymn book and began reading it on the air, starting at page one. When the engineer joined him at 7:00 and answered the screaming telephone, Johnny was attending to nothing else—no music, no commercials, no time checks, no sports scores or weather.

The engineer did what the station manager told him to do over the telephone. He put on a musical feed from the control room. Then he went into the studio to tell Johnny he could stop now, but Johnny paid no attention. I was not there, but the way they tell it he was still reading when the manager showed up at nine and when the boss tried to close the hymn book, Johnny bloodied his nose with a backhand.

That brought in the cops and it ended with the studio turned into a room full of kindling and broken glass and with Jonathan Fitzwilliam being taken away in restraints.

He spent a month in the Allen Memorial talking to the doctors and

responding to medication. Then he came out, calm and apologetic, and threw away the pills they had given him, switching to booze. Then he disappeared and we thought our old friend had switched cities. But Mervin Stein, who was doing Johnny's personal income tax in those days, checked the bank and found the \$200,000 was still there.

For a while we speculated foul play, or even suicide, but a body that size has to show up. And it did, six months later in New York City. They shipped him home under sedation with a big-armed male nurse, all at the radio station's expense. This time my friend was released from the Allen a very healthy man. He was wide open now, absolutely in touch with reality, and ready to resume his life.

"Lenore would think I was pretty stupid," he told me, using his wife's name as if she were in the next room, "leaving all that money in the bank. I'm going to talk to Koshe about a thing I have in mind."

Koshe was Johnny's nickname for Mervin Stein. They did talk, about buying a failed second-hand bookshop on Stanley Street and putting it on a sound business footing as a private club, reading room, drinking and eating place, chess parlour and occasional dance hall. In surprisingly short order it all happened, and they called it The Ninety-Seven. Johnny explained the name to me. "You know, Den, it wasn't just my wife and son who died in that air crash. Ninety-seven souls all went together. I'm not the only one who lost people that day." Later, he harked back to the point. "Don't ever worry about dying, old sod. You won't be alone. It's you and me and everybody who ever lived."

Johnny's smile when he told me this was like afternoon sunshine at the ball park.

So much for my friend leaving the radio business and becoming an independent club owner. You should also know how he got his nickname.

There used to be a late-evening radio show from the lounge of a jazz club called The Riverboat, and it was chaired by Jonathan Fitzwilliam. He would play records from his private collection of Basies and Luncefords, and even an occasional Bing Crosby from the early years when the man was really singing. One night Johnny was talking on the air to Arnie Pender, the club owner. I remember it well; I was schlepping a free drink at the celebrity table. Suddenly we all became aware of an obnoxious patron with a sweating face and a tight blue suit who was leaning into the interview. I remember what he said. He said,

"Hey, faggot. Did you hear about the two queer radio announcers? Jonathan Fitzwilliam and William Fitzjonathan."

Johnny didn't even stand up. He just drew back and drove a ten-inch right-hand jab into the dimple in the protruding jaw. The heckler went down into an empty chair, head lolling, then slid out of the chair onto his knees, a slow, heavy decline onto the floor face down, like a rolled-up carpet collapsing.

After the applause, Arnie Pender produced a label that would last forever. "Never mind Jonathan Fitzwilliam," he said. "You should be called Johnny Fist."

Anyway, enough with the ancient history. Back to what was happening at The Ninety-Seven at lunch hour on this hectic afternoon. Dallas was pushing plates of beef curry across the counter and I wanted mine. I took a plate, went looking for a place to sit and found myself back where I did not want to be, across the table from Noble Kingbright with Linda on my left.

"That curry is hot stuff," Kingbright said. He went to get us another round of drinks which I, for one, did not want. But go argue with Hyperhost.

I looked at Linda. She has a funny way of drinking; she takes a swig, makes a face of mild disgust and then sets the glass down with an abrupt thrust away from her, turning her head at the same time as if that is definitely the last taste of booze she will ever tolerate. But a minute later, she is doing the same thing. I wanted to get her talking because Linda Lennox's speech is in the beguiling cadence of the Deep South. I'd pay to listen to her.

"Well then," I said, "how goes the battle?"

She looked at me; sparkling black eyes in a sweet, round face. "I just wish you would ask Jonathan to keep his hands off Noble."

She pronounced the word "hayunds." I relished it. "You felt the tension too?" I said.

"I declare, it's like the overture to World War Three when those two confront each other. And there's no use my speaking to Jonathan about it. He will not listen to me on the subject in any way, shape or form."

"You have to admit your friend comes on strong."

"Well he does, yes. But that's because he's a creative individual and at the moment he happens to have a very important project on his mind."

On his maaahnd . . . a sweet, hypnotic syllable. Then Kingbright came back with the drinks and broke the spell.

"That's right. I am into an original suspense film in which the pistol, the murder weapon, is the star," he said. "And I know just the pistol to use. A most photogenic weapon, all long and sexy and heavy in the hand."

"I didn't know you were a feature-filmmaker," I said. "I thought you produced TV commercials."

"For wages. Unfortunately, the family income to which I am entitled through blood is denied me on the grounds of a technicality. My baronial, Teutonic father chose not to honor my mother with a wedding ceremony."

I said, "You'll need tons of money to make a film."

"Ve haf vays of gettink ze necessary funds," Kingbright said, leaning back in his chair, eyelids lowered, letterslot lips spread in a slashing smile.

"I wish you luck." I glanced at Linda, who was watching Kingbright's performance with cold eyes. If the man was going to approach a backer for support, it was to be hoped he would sober up first.

The lunch crowd dispersed and it was after two o'clock when I got back to Johnny about the troublesome note. We were upstairs in his apartment above the club, Johnny with the telephone on his lap and a roster of club members in his hand. I was holding his guitar against my chest, plucking a few chords.

"I was hoping Disco might come in for lunch," he said, dialing. "I'd better call him."

"What is this Cleary thing?"

"It happened years ago, before I left Baytown and came down here. Cleary was a cop, the best man on the force. He could have gone on and become Chief if he'd wanted to stick at it. Hell, he could have run for Mayor—he was one of those guys you have to admire. Then this hassle happened with Disco."

"What hassle?"

"It's a long story. I'll tell you when . . ." I heard a natter of response on the phone. "Hello, Emery? It's Johnny. Where are you keeping yourself these days?"

They small-talked for a minute or so and then Johnny filled the man

in on the note he had received. Disco seemed to treat it as a joke. I could hear him laughing. By the time the call ended, Johnny had agreed to come up to the house later in the afternoon and talk about how they should handle the situation.

Johnny emphasized his warning. "You may think you know Don Cleary from that one exposure to him, Emery. But believe me, I know him better. He's a stubborn guy."

We got out the cards and killed an hour with the cribbage board. Then my friend got up, a tailored mountain rising into the air. "Come on, let's go have a splash in Emery Disco's swimming pool. We've been invited."

"You've been invited."

"Wherever I go," he said, "you go. Damon and Runyon."

So I went with Johnny Fist on that hot, hazy afternoon and we flagged a taxi. Then we headed up Cote des Neiges onto the shaded plateau of Upper Westmount. Disco's house on Cherry Hill Crescent was concealed by leafy maples, but what we could see of it was grey stone and leaded glass and rich, grainy oak. We walked along the winding flagstone path, listening to the wealthy hush of summertime. There were no growling trucks in this neighborhood, no pedestrians, no kids screaming in the street. Even the grasshoppers kept their activity down to a respectful strum, and the birds whispered.

"How the other half lives," I murmured.

"You mean the other two percent," Johnny said.

He pulled the iron handle jutting from the stone wall beside the doorframe. Inside, at a distance, a well-tuned chime said, "Clong." A minute later it was my turn; a double clong.

"Let's look around at the back," Johnny said.

I followed him over a carpet of grass along the front of the house and between a high hedge and the side wall which was edged with petunias and marigolds.

"I wish you'd tell me what Disco did to your friend Cleary," I said. "I want to know how to act."

"It's a long story. He'll probably tell you himself better than I could."

We walked into the back yard and I closed the iron gate behind me. The area was enclosed on three sides by stone walls eight feet high, which were themselves masked by four poplar trees and one weeping

willow which was in a position to cry a few leafy tears into the swimming pool. On the fourth side, the house stared down at us with what seemed like a hundred windows.

At first we thought the yard was empty and, in a sense, I suppose it was. There were a couple of deck chairs drawn up on the concrete patio beside the pool. There was a wicker-and-glass table with a paperback book on it and a pair of sunglasses.

"Emery?" Johnny said in what would pass around these parts for a loud voice. No answer, except a shiver passed along from one poplar tree to the others. Then we saw them in the pool.

I recognized Disco, even face down in the blue water surrounded by the red slick of his blood. He was wearing bathing trunks. The two women were fully dressed except for shoes. One had gray hair. The other was a younger person with long black hair fanning out on the surface of the water. All were floating with arms outstretched as though they were looking for something on the bottom of the pool.

The fourth corpse floated on its side, eyes open and tongue extended—a huge Alsatian dog.

"Good Jesus," Johnny said, "would you look at what he's done?"

"So you think Cleary got there ahead of us," I said. We were walking along Cedar Avenue with the city and the St. Lawrence River spread out below us, on our way back to the club on foot. After our session with the police and all the lifting of wet bodies from the pool, we needed the fresh air.

"I don't want to believe it, but what else is there?"

"Is that why you didn't show the Inspector the note you got?"

"I want to find Don first. I want to talk to him." Johnny was in full stride and I was hard pressed to keep even. "There has to be another explanation. If you knew Don Cleary the way I do, you'd understand why I say that. I can imagine a situation where he might kill Disco in a struggle. But not the wife and daughter. Not the dog."

"When are you going to tell me what Disco did to Cleary?"

"Right now," he said. "When Cleary was a Baytown cop, he happened to arrest Disco for a minor traffic violation. Emery was just driving through. Then he remembered the name and tied Disco in with a con job in Toronto. So he locked him up and called the Toronto cops to come for him."

"Emery a con man?"

"He had his little ways. The point is, he offered Cleary twenty thousand bucks to let him go. That was a mistake. Nobody bribes Don Cleary. But then Disco managed to slip a note and some money to a kid who brought in food from a restaurant. The result was, two friends of Disco's showed up pretending to be the cops who were coming from Toronto. Cleary fell for it and let Disco go with them."

"Okay, so Disco conned his way out of Baytown jail. Why didn't Cleary just put a routine tracer on him and forget about it?"

"Because it ate away at him. It was what everybody in town talked about for a long time. Cleary fell apart the winter after it happened. He disappeared for a while and we heard he was in Kingston sanitarium. He showed up next spring but they never took him back on the force."

"Poor bastard."

"Last I heard he was hustling beer at the Coronet Hotel."

It was rush hour on Sherbrooke Street when we got back down off the mountain. We had made a half-mile descent from heaven on earth into hell on wheels. The office crowd was heading for home in anything that would move. The roads were plugged with cars and the cars were packed with citizens, all windows open, all faces red and wet.

"Anyway," Johnny said, "the rap in Toronto—Disco squared that years ago. Everybody got paid most of what they invested and the book is closed."

"Does Cleary know that?"

"Don wouldn't want to know. There was a crime, there must be punishment. He could never bend an inch."

We were on Drummond Street. I followed Johnny into the Central YMCA lobby, heading for the long corridor that would lead us through to the exit on Stanley Street, a few doors above The Ninety-Seven. We were passing a bank of elevators when Johnny stopped dead. I piled into his massive back. He straightened me out and pushed me into one of the elevators just as the door was closing.

"Are we checking in?" I said. "I never knew you cared."

Johnny was not listening to me. In addition to the old guy handling the doors, there was one other man in the elevator. He was pale gray in color; that was what struck me first. In Montreal, in July, almost everybody carries some degree of sunburn but this long hollow face

was made of parchment. His clothes hung on his bones. As he smiled at Johnny, pale green eyes flickered like lamps back inside his head.

"Dennis Masterson," Johnny said, "meet an old friend of mine from Baytown. Don Cleary."

The inside of Cleary's room on the tenth floor was untidy and the air was stale. There was no sign of a suitcase but a paper shopping bag lay on the floor, spilling a crumpled shirt. One rolled blue sock peeked out from under the bed. Johnny sat on the window ledge, blocking most of the light. "I got your note, Don. Sorry I wasn't in when you telephoned."

Cleary said, "No problem. I was surprised how easy it was to find Disco."

So there it was. The man was so crazy he was about to take credit for the slaughter. Nobody said anything for half a minute. Cleary lowered himself onto the bed as though he had learned a way to keep his bones from separating. This left the leatherette armchair vacant so I sat down in it.

"Why did you kill them?" Johnny said.

"I didn't."

"Come on, Don. We just came from there. We found them all dead."

"That's how I found them. They were all dead."

Johnny Fist looked at me across the room. He wanted to believe this maniac.

"Then I wonder who did kill them," I said.

"The Avenging Angel."

"The Avenging Angel," I repeated, just so it would be clear on the record.

Johnny said, "Nobody is going to believe you if you say that, Don."

"It's the truth. Anyway, Disco has paid the price. That's all I wanted." Cleary put the edge of a thumb to his mouth and gnawed the tattered flesh, his eyes glazed.

We let some moments pile up around us. Then Johnny looked hard at me and said, "You wanted to go to the can, didn't you, Denny? Don, why don't you be a gentleman and show my friend where the can is."

I almost said something but then I realized he wanted to search the

room. We went down the hall, Cleary and I, wasted a few minutes in the lavatory, then headed back to the room. He went in first and when I followed him and closed the door, I saw Johnny was holding a pistol with a silencer on the muzzle. It was a long nasty-looking weapon.

"This was in your top drawer," Johnny said. When Cleary remained silent, he added, "The police said the shooting had to have been done with a silencer."

Now Cleary said, "Not my gun."

"It doesn't have to be your gun. Is it the gun that killed Disco?"

"It must be."

"How did you get it?"

"I took it from the Avenging Angel. We struggled, but I had the strength to prevail."

"I wish I could believe that."

"Believe it, Jonathan. God brought me to this city so that I could see the wicked brought to justice."

The scene was starting to spook me. Cleary was standing there, flickering like a candle in the wind and Johnny was hesitating, trying to swallow something that was stuck in his throat.

"I'm sorry, Johnny," I said, "but I think your friend is a sick man. And you are now holding the murder weapon. If you take my advice, you'll deliver Cleary and that gun to Number Ten Station."

"I guess you're right."

"Of course I'm right. And you'd better turn in that note he sent you. That's evidence. It's against the law to conceal it."

Cleary looked right at me then for the first time. He seemed to be admiring me. "Let's get the hell out of here," I said.

We were on Maisonneuve, about a block from the police station, when Cleary made a run for it. He was walking between us and nobody was holding onto anybody. Suddenly he was off into the stream, heading back the way we had come. For a man who looked like he was on his last legs, he sure had pace. Johnny made a token move to go after him but then gave it up.

"You let him get away," I said.

"What could I do? I can't move in all these people."

"Like hell. You should have had a grip on him in the first place."

Johnny Fist looked at me, his eyes full of amusement. "What are you so excited about?"

"The man killed those people. And you let him get away."

"Maybe he killed them, maybe he didn't."

"Oh, come on, don't give me the Avenging Angel. It's him. He's a classic schizophrenic."

"So what if he is? What's it got to do with you?"

I had to think about that. After all, he was Johnny's friend, not mine. I'd never heard of Cleary before this morning. As for the dead Disco family, just read the papers. It's happening every day. Why was I so excited?

"He's a criminal," I said. "He broke the law."

Johnny smiled warmly. "I declare," he said, "you're starting to sound just like him." He headed back towards Stanley Street, his jacket pocket bulging. "Come on, let's get this gun put away in a safe place."

It's a funny thing how waves settle. I told myself when I came away from Emery Disco's backyard that I would never be able to get that scene out of my mind. Now here it was, two days later, with Cleary vanished from his YMCA room, and already I was getting on with the vital business of my life. Specifically, I was hovering around the piano in my apartment, hitting chords and performing my breathing exercises, hoping to extend my modest range by half a tone.

My telephone rang and it was Johnny. "Saturday morning without snooker pool is like a day without sunshine," he said.

"That's a good slogan," I said. "Why don't you sell it to the orange juice people?"

"We'll shoot a game," he said. "Then if you want, you can stay with me while I go over and see Koshe. He has a quarterly statement for me to sign."

"Mervin Stein works on Saturdays?"

"It gets him out from under Mitzi and the kids."

Johnny and I met on the broad cement steps leading up to the third-floor level at Leader Billiards where all the snooker tables stand on a Saturday morning, shadowy and quiet under their dark green canopies. We selected cues while the attendant snapped on the light over table 19 and stamped our card in the time clock. I took it from him, paying at the same time for a couple of large Pepsis and four small bags of peanuts.

Jonathan led the way to the table, doffing his jacket, chalking his cue. "Who breaks?"

"Be my guest."

He slammed the cue ball into the triangle of reds with a powerful thrust of his cue. I waited until two red balls had dropped into pockets before I said, "No flukes off the break."

Johnny had been lining up his next shot but now he stepped back. "Go ahead," he said. "You'll need all the help you can get."

He was right. He made every shot on the table and I had to concede the first game by the time we got to the blue ball. In the second game, Johnny's attention began to wander. He missed a few shots and I made a good run that included three blacks, so when only the colored balls were left I was twenty points up. Then he was sitting staring at the table but not seeing it.

"Your shot," I said.

He stayed where he was. "The cops are saying it may be a gangland execution," he said. "Did you see the story in the *Gazette*?"

"Yes. But we know better, don't we? We met the Avenging Angel. We have his gun."

"Cleary could be telling the truth. He went there to arrest Disco—that would be his style. But he surprised the killer and took the gun away from him."

I looked at the oily floor and shook my head. "An experienced underworld hit-man gives up his gun to that walking wreck. Some scenario."

"Don't be fooled. Don is stronger than he looks."

"If it was a contract, the killer wouldn't make that mistake."

"They aren't that professional around here," Johnny said. "This isn't New York. Some of the local hoods are real meatballs."

I leaned my cue against the table and put my hands in my pockets. "Are we going to finish this game?"

"My mind isn't on it."

"Then who pays?"

"You pay. I haven't any money."

Johnny's business with his accountant took no time at all but we spent an hour in Stein's office anyway. It was a pleasant visit. Merv keeps a huge samovar on a table in his waiting room. The machine came from Russia with his grandparents who were smart enough to emigrate with dignity and their possessions before later generations had to leave on the run.

His girl made us tea and brought it into the office where we were sitting in deep black leather chairs on a white carpet around a low brass and glass table. The young lady had ebony skin and wore a wine velvet suit. She had gone to the trouble of cutting her hair very short and changing its color to ash blonde. She looked almost as splendid as Mervin himself, who was dressed in a powder blue suit with a white shirt open at the neck. He sparkled at the extremities with gold cufflinks and patent-leather shoes. His face was dominated by eyes as large and dark as ripe olives separated by a nose as bold as a monolith. His hair was a thundercloud.

"I understand why *you* work Saturdays," Johnny said, "but how do you get *her* to work Saturdays?"

"I removed a thorn from her paw," Stein said. "She'll do anything for me."

"Let's talk more about that," I said.

"No, let's talk about the murders," Johnny said. "Disco was a client of yours, wasn't he, Koshe?"

"For a long time."

"What do you think of the story in the paper today? Gangland execution."

Stein got up and went to the window and stood with his back to us, an elegant pose with one hand against the frame, his forehead balanced against his wrist. "It could be," he said. "Disco had enemies."

Johnny sat up in his chair and threw a quick glance at me. I got the message; not a word about Cleary.

"What enemies?"

Stein turned around. He cracked his long fingers at each of their many joints. "That's a matter of professional confidence, Johnny."

"Oh come on, Koshe, you aren't a priest. You don't hear confessions."

"Yeah, but if word gets around that I spill secrets, I could get hurt."

"Spill just this one. I won't say a word."

Stein looked at me. I said, "I'm Johnny's puppet. I only speak when he moves my mouth."

"Okay. I also do the books for the Riverboat lounge."

"Arnie Pender," Johnny said.

"I happen to know Disco was into Arnie for a lot of money and they were having trouble collecting."

"Money problems?" I said. "With that castle he lives in?"

"Don't be fooled. By the time the creditors are paid, the Disco estate will be a negative asset." Stein turned to Johnny. "It's possible they decided to make an example of him. Pender sent a gun around to hit Disco and the family showed up unexpectedly so he wasted them too."

His telephone rang then and it was his wife reminding him that he was going to take the kids to Westmount Park. His voice changed on us; it became a high-pitched, impatient harangue.

"Mitzi, I can't! I have people in the office right now. *You* take them. No, don't put Rodney on the phone. I can't talk to him now. Rod, tell your mother to come back on the line. Daddy is very busy today, Rod, you and Len will have to amuse yourselves. Well of course you can amuse yourselves . . ."

We left poor Mervin and took the scenic walk along Sherbrooke Street past the park, past Atwater Avenue with the Forum below us waiting for September so it could start packing in the hockey crowds again, past the red brick apartment buildings leading to Guy Street, and then past the rows of tiny shops with one dress or one painting in each window.

We arrived at The Ninety-Seven and I hated to go inside. Johnny held the massive oak door open for me, spilling out onto the sidewalk the metallic aroma of air-conditioning mixed with stale beer and a million exhaled cigarettes.

"Can't we go and sit in Dominion Square?" I asked him.

"Are you coming in?" He stood in the doorway, looking at me balefully out of the shadows. "I work here, remember?"

I followed him inside and soon wished I had not. Dallas met us at the foot of the winding staircase with an empty glass in his hand. He said to Johnny,

"Linda is on her third one of these. She started at noon."

"Shit a brick," Johnny said and began tramping up the stairs, his shoes clanging on the metal treads. I went to sit at the bar.

"Anything for you?" Dallas asked me.

"It's early for me."

"It's early for most people." Right from the start, Dallas had been immune to the charms of Linda Lennox.

For a few minutes, the dialogue between Johnny and Linda was

muted. Then they began to play it like performers on a stage. Their voices came ringing down the stairway.

"I don't want you getting bagged in the morning. It makes you a pain in the ass by four o'clock."

"How would you know? You're always out with your boy friend. When are you and Dennis getting married?"

Johnny talked low and fast for a few seconds. I suppose he was telling her I was downstairs. She sounded only a little restrained as she said,

"I don't care. It's true."

"What's wrong with you? You used to be somebody I could talk to. Now all you want to do is lush it up with that idiot Kingbright."

"He's a great relief after you. He doesn't just use me and walk away. Let go of me. I have to go to another man if I want any kind of consideration."

She came rattling down the stairway, her long skirt hitched up in one hand, her purse under her arm. There were tears on her cheeks and the dark eyes were a little out of kilter, as though she had been hit hard on the side of the head. Something was eating her up these days.

The place seemed awfully quiet after the front door banged behind her. For a few moments, the only sound was the squeak of Dallas's bar cloth on the rim of a glass. I got up and went to the foot of the stairs.

"Big John?"

"Yazzah!"

"How's about Dominion Square?"

"You go, old sod. I think I'll rest here for a while."

I stood listening to the silence, waiting for some further message from above. It came. The sound of one of Johnny's old .78 records on the machine. It was Duke Ellington, the poignant cry of "Lady of the Lavender Mist." If that was where Johnny Fist was going to be on this Saturday afternoon, it was noplac for me.

I did go to Dominion Square for a while, sitting on a bench, half in sun, half in shade, watching the people come and go through the main door of the Windsor Hotel. There was a rich, wet, green smell in the air. A lady in a print dress with a newspaper folded on her head threw a handful of breadcrumbs on the pavement and was mobbed by pigeons.

I spent the afternoon in Loew's, watching a science-fiction film.

When I came out onto Ste. Catherine Street, it was the time of day I like best in summer. There was a mood of subdued tension among the tanned faces watching themselves as they passed the department store windows. I was torn between roaming for an hour or so, enjoying this idyllic mood, or heading back to The Ninety-Seven to see if Johnny had surfaced out of his indigo, lavender, turquoise pool of Ellington and introspection.

In the end I went home and practiced my scales. Then I lay down and slept for an hour. When I got up and showered and put on a fresh suit, the sky was almost dark and from my high-rise balcony I could see nothing but lights in buildings, on streets and bridges and on chains of automobiles.

I taxied to the club, enjoying the delays in traffic so I could look out my window at the girls. I thought of Françoise, the script girl at CBC who three months ago had tired of waiting for me to get serious and had gone and married her college sweetheart. Maybe it was time for me to get involved again, to whatever extent I could manage.

The Ninety-Seven was as busy as it ever gets. All the tables were occupied, three chess games were in progress, and from the lower room I could hear the throb of electric guitars seeping through the double doors. I drank for a while and exchanged a brief greeting with Johnny, who was busy playing host.

Then, about eleven, there was a savage hammering on the front door, the sort of assault I associate with the arrival of Cossacks in the night. In the shocked silence somebody said, "It's a raid," and a few people laughed. When the locked door was opened by the nearest member, in walked Noble Kingbright clad in a floor-length cloak of black velvet and holding before him a sword, the pommel and guard raised high like a cross, his glittering eyes fixed on it so that he came on like Joan of Arc. The applause was enthusiastic and, I must admit, deserved. Full marks for artistic impression.

Having made his entrance, Kingbright confronted Johnny and said, "If you would grant me a membership in your tacky club, I would have a key and would not find it necessary to bash down your door."

Johnny unfolded his arms and let them hang at his sides but otherwise he did not move. "That is a dangerous weapon you're holding," he said. "It's against the law for you to have it with you."

Kingbright lifted the blade and looked at it, the way a man admires a

well-developed muscle in his own arm. He ran his tongue along his teeth and I could hear how dry his mouth was inside. For the first time I sensed how very drunk he was. When he slipped the sword back into its sheath, the room let out its breath.

"To business," Kingbright said. "I am here because Miss Linda Lennox informs me she has left a certain notebook in the upper room. And since she has no desire to present herself in this location ever again, she has sent me to pick it up."

Johnny glanced at me. "Dennis, get the notebook."

I hurried up the winding stairs and found the book on the bedside table. It opened in my hand and I saw pages of scrawled handwriting—some sort of story Linda was working on, I assumed. When I got back downstairs, Kingbright was saying,

"The portrait I am posing for will be magnificent. Boulanger is a depraved man but a great artist. You must all come to the studio and see it."

I handed the notebook to Jonathan who passed it to Noble Kingbright. "There you are," he said. "What you came for."

Kingbright swept the notebook under one arm and strode to the bar, upon which he laid down his sword with a clatter. He reached into a pocket and drew out a fistful of money. Some of it fell to the floor, a careless litter of twenty-dollar bills. He tossed several to Dallas.

"Drinks," he roared, "for everybody within sound of my voice!"

Then he made a fast departure, with his sword sloped across one shoulder and his cloak billowing behind him. I followed Johnny to the bar and saw him give to Dallas the money Kingbright had dropped on the floor.

"Put that aside," he said. "I'll see he gets it back."

I said, "Where do you suppose he came into all the loot? He used to complain about being flat all the time."

"Who knows? Maybe the baronial Teutonic father sent his bastard son a birthday present." Then he said, "Let's drop in on Arnie Pender. I want to find out whether Koshe was onto something this afternoon."

The Riverboat lounge was halfway down Stanley Street towards Dorchester Boulevard. The doorman needed a shave, a clean shirt and a few lessons in brushing his teeth.

"Johnny Fist," he said, flinging wide the door and welcoming us into the pungent atmosphere of cheap perfume and beer-soaked carpet.

"Why don't you come back and do your old radio show?"

"Them days is gone forever," Johnny said.

We stood for a moment in the doorway to the Bayou Room, looking for Pender. It was quiet in there; the prostitutes were buying each other drinks. All the action was in the main room where we could hear a rhythm-and-blues band scorching the paint off the walls and ceiling. Johnny led the way next door.

The band was a swinging mass of screaming reeds and throbbing strings, playing so far above melting point that they had fused some time ago into one inseparable slab of sequined tuxedos and black skin. When the set finally came to an end, it would be necessary to cut the act up with an acetylene torch and haul it off the stage in sections.

Arnie Pender was nowhere in the main room so we threaded our way along the side wall towards the doorway leading to his upstairs office. We went through, closing the door behind us, which reduced the level of music to muffled hysteria.

Ahead of us stretched a long narrow flight of wooden stairs. A young man in a double-breasted suit left his post at the top and doubled down to meet us.

"You can't come in here," he said. He was a new man; Johnny and I were strangers to him. He had a massive torso and his arms hung loose and slightly in front of him as though he was suspended from a hook in the middle of his back. This was no meatball. His skin was bronzed and his hair was oiled and he had *sauna* written all over him.

"It's all right," Jonathan said. "We're friends of Arnie." He made as if to go ahead.

"Nobody goes in," the bodyguard said. And here he made his mistake. He walked right into my friend and stepped on the toe of one of Johnny's shoes. Johnny grabbed him with both hands, one of them seizing the material of his suit at the belly, the other his shirt and tie at the collar. His feet were off the floor now and he was being run back up the stairs, carried over Johnny's head like a shield. Nor did the charge end on the top landing. Johnny kept right on going, using the body in his hands like a ram to burst open the door.

By the time I got into the office, Arnie Pender was standing up behind his desk with wide eyes and Johnny had set the bodyguard back on his feet. I could see broken fingernails on Johnny's left hand. Adrenalin is a wonderful thing.

"Tell your new man I'm a friend of yours," Johnny said.

We were introduced to the bodyguard. His name was Ernie and he came from out West where he had been Mr. Prairie Provinces. He gave us a prairie smile—bleak and flat—and left the room.

Arnie Pender sat us down and got us a drink from his cabinet. Pender is in his late fifties and he must carry close to 300 pounds on a frame not much taller than mine. When he moves, you'd think he had large sacks of water suspended inside the legs of his trousers. We were on our second drink when our host said,

"Why are you here, Johnny? You didn't come storming through that door just because you miss me."

Johnny opened up then about Emery Disco and, while Pender listened with his big face growing dark, my friend told him how he suspected it was a gangland hit.

"Not in my book," Pender said. "Even if somebody wanted to waste Disco, why go that far? It doesn't make sense." He considered. Then he said, "Why all the interest in Disco? I didn't know he was a special friend of yours."

"I'm interested because of something I heard today," Johnny said. "I was told Disco was into you and your backers for a lot of money."

"Where did you hear that?"

"It doesn't matter where I heard it. Is it true?"

Pender's easy smile had faded. "It's true. Disco owed the organization for a long time. We wanted him to find the money. Now we'll have to write it off." His smile returned. He said, "You don't have to tell me where you heard about the money Disco owed. I can tell you. Merv Stein."

"Koshe never said a word to me," Johnny lied to keep the peace. "I haven't seen him in a week."

Pender's smile became a grin. "Tell you something, John. If you're tracing murder suspects, take a look at Stein. He's a busy guy."

"You're kidding."

"Don't laugh. I happen to know Stein invests money for his clients. Only the way he does it, not all of it goes into secure stuff. Some of it he puts in high-risk ventures with better interest and when it works, he keeps a percentage."

Johnny shook his head but it sounded right to me. I always thought Merv had a swift, elusive look about him.

"Believe it, my friend," Pender went on. "Now suppose Stein had done this with some of Disco's money, only the risk turned sour. We were pushing Disco, I've admitted that. He'd be pushing Stein and Stein might have panicked."

Johnny put his hand on the telephone on Pender's desk. "Do you mind if I tell him you said so?"

"Hey, yeah," he said. "That's beautiful. Call him and tell him I put the finger on him. I know he told you it was me."

Johnny dialed and waited. Then his face brightened and he said, "Hello, Mitzi, this is Jonathan. Can I speak to Merv for a minute? Did he? No, he didn't say a word about it to me. No, there isn't any message. I'll talk to him when he gets back."

Johnny put down the phone and looked at Pender. "Koshe got on a plane tonight for London. I guess he got called away on business."

Pender put a fingertip beneath his left eye and drew the rim down, making the eye wide and innocent. "Yeah, sure," he said.

We were on our way down the narrow stairs when we heard the telephone ring in Arnie's office. On a hunch, Johnny paused and waited. We heard Pender's voice, muffled. In a moment the door opened.

"That was your bartender," Pender called down to us. "He just got a call from somebody named Linda Lennox. You know her?"

"Yes."

"Well, she says you better get right over to the Boulanger studio on St. Denis Street. Somebody went out a window."

They had taken Noble Kingbright's broken body away by the time we got to Boulanger's place. The artist works in a garret up four flights of crusty stairs. There was a uniformed officer on the top landing but we had no trouble with him. It was Lucien Lacombe. We first met Lacombe when he was playing shortstop for a Police Association fastball team. Since then he was playing for us.

"Hey, Johnny," he said, "did you know this guy?"

"He was a mutual friend of mine and Linda's."

"She's in there now." Lucien casually put a fist into my stomach and I responded with an appropriate flinch. "How's our good right fielder?"

"Getting run ragged these days. Too many people dying."

"It's a bad summer. First Milligan, then all those people in the swimming pool. Now this one."

Johnny asked what had happened. Lucien said it was all over when they got there. The jumper had been drunk and was swinging, of all things, an unsheathed sword. Like Willie Stargell at home plate, was how Lucien put it. Boulanger apparently tried to settle the man down and received a cut on the arm. He went away to borrow a bandage from a girl he knew downstairs. Then he heard more yelling and running in the loft and when he got back up, there was only the girl left in the room, standing by the open window with blood on her skirt.

"Thanks, Lucie," Johnny said. "I think I better go in and talk to her."

We encountered the Inspector on his way out of the studio. It was the same man who had seen us in Disco's back yard. We explained our connection with Linda and the deceased. We confirmed that Kingbright had been drunk and a little manic when he left The Ninety-Seven earlier in the evening. We also mentioned his conspicuous affluence with twenties all over the floor. This drew a satisfied smile from the police officer.

"That may wrap up the Disco killings. The girl tells us that Kingbright went to see Disco on the afternoon it happened. He was making a film and he wanted Disco to put up some money."

Johnny was keeping his mouth tight shut but his eyes were alive. The Inspector said,

"She tells us there was a pistol to be used in the film and that Kingbright had it with him when he went to see Disco. He didn't have it with him tonight but I've sent somebody to search his room. When it turns up, I think ballistics will show it was the gun that killed the Disco family."

I waited for Johnny to say he could assist the police in their search for the murder weapon, but he said nothing.

"So you believe the guilty man took his own life tonight," I said.

The Inspector nodded. "It seems logical, according to what the girl inside tells us."

He went away, taking Lucien Lacombe with him. Johnny and I went inside. He hurried to Linda while I stopped with Boulanger. The artist was standing in front of the unfinished portrait, frowning at it through half-closed eyes while he reamed a nostril with the tip of his little finger.

"This kind of work is really not my thing," Boulanger said. As sup-

port for this statement, a crowd of brilliant abstracts shouted at me from every side of the studio. "But he was a persuasive man. He made me believe I wanted to do it."

"Did he pay you for it?"

Boulanger turned pained eyes upon me. "That is an irrelevant factor now, wouldn't you agree?" he said.

Feeling I had said the wrong thing, I was glad to move away and approach Jonathan and Linda, who were standing now and talking. "He was raving," Linda said. "After he cut Paul's arm, he wouldn't stop laughing."

"When I came in earlier, it was like the man was in church. A priest," Boulanger said.

"We were here early," Linda said. "I kept telling Noble to calm down."

"He was on his knees in front of the painting," Boulanger went on, "like at a prie-dieu. The sword was stuck in the floor in front of him and he was chanting about being guilty of something."

"He wouldn't stop yelling," Linda said. "He kept on about guilt and punishment. I asked him if he was talking about the murders at the swimming pool. I knew he went there with the gun to talk to Mr. Disco. When I said this, he got worse and he began pointing the sword at himself."

Johnny took Linda by the shoulders and held her, shaking her to bring her out of it.

"He stabbed himself," she said, her breath bubbling in her throat. "He held the sword in both hands and he ran it into his stomach. He was standing right here." She pointed at the spattered boards below the window ledge. "Then he stumbled backwards and was gone."

I watched Jonathan bury the tiny girl in his arms and I said to Boulanger, more for my own benefit than anybody else's,

"Have you got anything to drink around here?"

He had half a gallon of red wine, imported at no great expense. We drank a good quantity of this out of the artist's rare collection of jam jars while sitting with our backs to Kingbright's half-finished portrait and listening to Linda as she calmed herself down.

"It all adds up," Johnny said finally, his gaze directed at the studio window, closed and bolted now that it no longer mattered. "Kingbright must have threatened Disco when he refused to back his film. I

imagine the dog went for him and he shot it first. Then Disco himself. And then the wife and kid when they came out into the yard."

"Where did all the money come from?" I said.

Johnny hardly paused. "He took it out of Disco's pocket. Emery always had a lot of cash on him."

We said goodbye to Paul Boulanger and went outside to where Linda's car was parked. Johnny said to me, "This fits in with what Cleary said. He came along just after the shooting and took the gun from Kingbright."

"You see it that way?"

"I wish I could find Don and tell him he can stop running."

We climbed into the car and Linda took us on a swift erratic drive back to The Ninety-Seven. I declined Johnny's invitation to come in for a nightcap and left them to their reconciliation.

My taxi ride home was troubled. I wondered when I would suck up my nerve and tell Johnny his case against Kingbright had at least one obvious hole in it. I could not picture the hysterical killer searching the house for cash with four dead bodies in the back yard. And how could he have gotten the money from Disco's pocket? The dead Disco was wearing nothing but a pair of bathing trunks.

Linda Lennox took a couple of days off work to recover from her ordeal. For this reason, she didn't hear the news at the ad agency. I had to pick it up from Dallas, who got it off the street. It was my justification for going back to Johnny and telling him he was all wet about Kingbright being Disco's killer.

"How do you know?"

"The word is out that Kingbright misappropriated a pile of money from the office. Funds intended to be talent repayments for TV commercial performers. That, my friend, was the cash he was throwing around the club. It also explains all his talk about guilt."

Jonathan had brought a tray from the kitchen to Linda's bedside. He was doing everything now but feed her. It was a subservient side of the man I had not seen before and it made me uncomfortable. He said,

"Okay. But we know Kingbright went by himself to see Disco, and he had the gun with him. Right, Linda?"

"That he did."

"But Cleary claims he took the gun from whoever did the killing," I

said. "There's no way he could have got it from a big man like Kingbright."

"Cleary. Who's he?" Linda asked.

I told her about the note, Cleary's motive for getting Disco, his presence at the scene, his possession of the weapon, his flight from our custody. An air-tight case.

Linda said, "I buy what Dennis is saying. I wouldn't look any further."

But Johnny kept looking, refusing to accept the obvious evidence against his old hometown buddy. That's why he was ready to listen the next day when Mitzi Stein telephoned, full of worry about the missing Mervin. Johnny put down the phone and said to me,

"Listen to this about Koshe. He hasn't gone to England on business. He's gone for good. I think that means he was doing what Arnie Pender said. Losing Disco's money in risky investments."

"Tell it all," I said. "Mitzi was going on a lot more than that."

"Koshe has been getting letters from London for a year or so. Since the last time he was there."

"And?"

"Okay, he and Mitzi have been sleeping apart for quite a while. So what?"

"So Mervin has a girl friend in London and he's gone to live with her. He had nothing to do with Disco."

"Could be. But it also could be what I said, with or without the girl friend."

I stood by helplessly while Johnny put through a call to Air Canada. As he made the booking, he raised his eyebrows at me. If something was going to happen, I ought to be with him so I nodded my head. "Two seats."

Seeing England was nice, but the search for Mervin Stein turned out to be a depressing episode I would have been happy to miss. All we had to go on was a name and a return address from the outside of one of the letters Stein had been receiving. A suspicious Mitzi had copied it down in case a divorce lawyer might one day need it.

The address was on Grosvenor Street. The name turned out to be a subdued, smooth gentleman with polished nails and manners. No, he had not seen Mervin Stein lately, but last year he had thrown a large

party which the Canadian had attended. He was able to supply the name and telephone number of a mutual friend, a television writer, who had spent more time with Stein.

A call to the writer's answering service revealed that he was on the set at Thames Television in Teddington Lock. No, he could not be reached by telephone. But it was only half an hour by train from Waterloo Station.

"At least we're seeing London," I said later as we crossed the station concourse, avoiding squadrons of pigeons milling around a sign that said if we fed them we would be fined £100. Our train eased away from platform 9 and raced through slums, suburbs and green country, stopping at towns with good names like Wimbledon, and Hampton Wick.

At Teddington, we rode a taxi to the Thames studios which were located in acres of green fields beside the river, in which hundreds of pleasure boats were moored. We found the writer, not on the set but in the cafeteria. He was a reedy young man with a shaven head and weary gestures.

"Oh, Mervin is here all right, but he hasn't been to see me. When you see him, tell him an old friend hopes he catches fire."

Besides a lot of bitchy sarcasm, we got from the writer the phone number of a hotel in West Kensington where Stein was said to be registered. Johnny asked me to call and to tell Merv I just happened to be in town. He was afraid his voice would panic our man if he was guilty.

From a call box in the studio lobby, I got through to the hotel. Yes, Mr. Stein was staying there. They rang his room and a lush feminine voice with a cultured English accent came on the line. She passed me on to Mervin.

"Dennis! How nice to hear your voice. When did you get in?"

The words were right but he sounded tense. I made arrangements to come and see him that evening. Then, on the train back to Waterloo, I justified Mervin's anxiety. "Sure he was nervous. He's left his wife and he's booked in there with this English broad. He'd be wondering how I'd take it."

"Or he's on the run and doesn't want to be found." Johnny's face was thoughtful. "Never mind this evening. We're going there as soon as this train gets in."

In a way, Johnny turned out to be right. Mervin Stein was on the

run from us, but not because he killed anybody. When our taxi let us out across the street from the hotel, we saw a willowy girl pulling a comb through long golden hair as she stood beside a couple of bags on the sidewalk. As we watched, Merv came out of the front door, putting away his wallet. He spoke to her, then he began looking for a taxi. That was when he saw us. He looked around, but there was no place for him to go.

Johnny confronted him. "I think you killed Emery Disco, Koshe. You were gambling with his money in the stock market. You lost and you took the heavy way out."

"Not true, Johnny. I invested Emery's money, but it all came good."

"Then why the sudden departure?"

"It wasn't sudden. It's been on my mind for a long time. You wouldn't understand." Merv threw a reproachful glance at me.

"Try me," Johnny said.

"I've been buried in that life back home—the accountant and family man. It isn't me, Johnny. Never has been. It was all a big lie. Mitzi and I have been nothing for years."

"She said something about that."

"So it was stay there and die, or make a move. That's all. The real Mervin Stein has decided to let himself out of the closet."

I was watching Stein's companion. There was something about the shape of the jaw, the narrow hips in tailored jeans, the vaguely masculine posture. A slight shift of my point of view and there it was; despite the touch of lipstick, the haze of eyeshadow and the glistening hair, this was no woman. Mervin Stein was traveling with a very beautiful boy.

I nudged Jonathan. He looked where I was looking and made the connection a lot faster than I did.

Merv caught our glances and with a defensive tone in his voice, he said, "This is Simon."

So Johnny and I got back on a plane for Montreal, lighter by a few hundred dollars, having learned the secret of Mervin Stein's new existence, which would be considered sordid or liberating, depending on our attitude.

When we arrived back at The Ninety-Seven, descending from the airport limousine in the wee small hours of the morning, we discovered that the next event in the mystery had been programmed to greet us.

Dallas was sitting in a chair holding an icebag to the back of his head. Around him lay the shambles of the club interior; books had been cascaded from shelves, cupboard doors ripped open and contents strewn about. We knew the upstairs rooms would look the same.

"I don't know how long I was out," Dallas said. "But whoever it was didn't touch the cash. I checked it."

Johnny examined the bartender's scalp. "Have you called the cops?"

"I was about to."

"Don't. I know what this is." He went behind the bar and twiddled the dial on the safe. He came back with the murder gun, long and evil. He looked at me.

"It must have been Don Cleary. He was after this. You were right all along."

"You admit that now?"

"It wasn't Kingbright. It wasn't Arnie Pender. It wasn't Mervin Stein." I never saw my old friend look so unhappy. "So I guess I'll have to face the obvious. Let's go find Don Cleary."

We used my car to drive to Baytown, a pleasant 200 miles, much of it beside the St. Lawrence River and the green mounds of the Thousand Islands, with their half-concealed roofs of millionaires' cottages. Baytown is a small place. It should have been easy to locate a well-known citizen like Don Cleary. Our first call was at the police station.

"We've been looking ourselves," the man behind the desk told us. "We read about the Disco killings in the paper and when there was no sign of Cleary around here we put two and two together. Sent a wire to the Montreal police with a description. So far, no news."

I thought of that incriminating note Johnny had received and how much grief could have been saved had he gone immediately to the police. Again, I said nothing.

We tried the Coronet Hotel, a useless move. The beverage room where Cleary served beer was half full. We stopped for a couple of drafts and quizzed one of the waiters, a crimson-faced man with black leather hair that had a part down the middle half an inch wide. Red thread on his jacket pocket told us his name was Dave. Dave had not seen Cleary in over a week.

We even drove past Cleary's house, a berry-box cottage in a new

development where, Johnny told me, the golf course used to be. He had spent childhood days in this area searching pools for lost golf balls and for tadpoles. Now we found Cleary's wife on her knees on the lawn, grubbing weeds out of a petunia bed. She had no idea where her husband was. If we found him, would we tell him there was no money in the house for groceries?

Johnny offered her twenty, but she refused it. As we walked away, a haunted-looking ten-year-old boy came out of the kitchen door unwrapping a popsicle. In the car on the way to his brother's place, Jonathan said, "I'm sorry, but I don't believe Mrs. Cleary."

"Why not?"

"She's an old friend of mine from high school. No reason for her not to take money from me if she was really broke. And the kid with the popsicle—I think that was bought at the supermarket today."

"Pretty thin evidence."

"Call it a feeling then. Cleary is around and she's covering up."

We carried our bags into the old Fitzwilliam residence, half of a frame duplex with hollyhocks standing along the side wall and a noisy fox terrier on his hind legs behind the screen door. I met Johnny's brother Merlin, who is the lone occupant these days. The dark rooms reminded me of a theater after the performance with the cast all gone away; here, amid the unsprung furniture, watched by broad Irish faces in old wooden frames, Jonathan Fitzwilliam had played out the early years of his life, becoming what he is.

Merlin fed us, then invited us to accompany him to the Armoury to witness a practice of the regimental pipe band in which he is a snare drummer. We were inclined to accept when the telephone rang. It was for Johnny.

"Hello? I knew you were. How did you know I was looking for you? I figured she would. Where are you now? Okay. Can we get in? Then we'll see you."

Don Cleary was at Pine Street Public School, hiding out in the basement. He used to do summer maintenance work there, painting floors and such, and had kept a key. His wife told him we were in town and for some reason he was ready to see Jonathan.

There was a smell of oiled floors and running shoes in the old school. Looking through open doorways into deserted classrooms, I expected

to hear the bell signaling class changeover and then be trampled by hundreds of stampeding kids.

We found Cleary where he said he'd be, in the caretaker's cubbyhole beside the silent furnace room. He met us in the doorway, an embarrassed smile on his hollow face.

"I'm sorry I busted up your place, Johnny. I wanted to get hold of the gun."

Johnny produced it from his pocket, without the silencer on it now. It was the first time I knew he'd brought the weapon with him. "I should never have let you run away, Don. But the chase is over. Now I'm taking you to the police."

"Why?"

"To tell them what I know. The note you sent me. The fact that you were at Disco's that afternoon, and you were carrying this gun."

"But I didn't do the killing. I took the gun from the murderer."

My voice sounded loud in the concrete hovel. "If it wasn't you, Cleary, who was it?"

He smiled at me. "I promised myself not to tell. The killer should be rewarded for doing God's work."

Johnny stepped aside and motioned with the gun towards the door. "Come on, Don. Let's go."

As we walked by, Cleary turned and was on the gun hand like a cobra. I was blocked out of the action in the narrow space. Johnny seemed hard pressed. He was using both hands to try to wrestle the gun away from Cleary. The man must have been possessed with superhuman strength.

"Grab his head!" Johnny yelled and I tried to squeeze past but it was too late. I saw the muzzle of the gun turning slowly, a dark eye looking for someone. I heard the ear-splitting roar that reverberated in the concrete box, was blinded by the flash, smelled the acrid, burnt powder.

It was over. Don Cleary lay on the floor with Johnny kneeling beside him. My ears cleared in time to hear the dying man's last words.

"That's why I wanted the gun, Jonathan. All I wanted was out."

A couple of weeks later in Montreal, things seemed to be looking up. Johnny Fist had somehow squared the police by telling what he knew about Don Cleary without revealing that he had been concealing

he murder weapon. As far as they knew, Cleary had had it all along.

Then, to ice the cake, Linda Lennox came into the club late one afternoon to announce she was on her way to California. She was done with advertising in general and Montreal in particular. Film writing was her future, and the Coast was the place to be.

Johnny seemed ready to let her go and I was delighted. Visions of uninterrupted cribbage and snooker danced in my head. The good old life was coming back.

Linda went upstairs to pack some of her things. Johnny was totalling bar receipts and I was reading an ancient book of Victorian recipes with brown pages that crumbled like dried bay leaves. Then the door opened and in walked Mervin Stein. He looked a little shy, but clearer of eye than I had seen him in some time.

"I'm back," he announced.

We waited for him to say why.

"That scene over there wasn't working. I missed my kids," he said. "And in a crazy way, I missed Mitzi."

"That's nothing to be ashamed of," Johnny said.

"I was hoping you wouldn't say anything about what I was into in England. She doesn't know I go that way."

"Not a word from us," Johnny said and I nodded.

Before he went away, Merv said, "How goes it with you, Johnny?"

"Changes, like everybody. I'm losing Linda Lennox. She's off to Hollywood to write movies."

Merv stuck out his lower lip. "Too bad Disco got killed. Otherwise, he might have backed the film she was writing here."

Our heads lifted as we listened to that new thought. Johnny said, "What film? Wasn't that Kingbright's film?"

"Yeah, he was directing but it was Linda's screenplay. In fact, it was a lot more hers than his."

"How do you know this?"

"Because Disco asked my advice about investing in it. Linda had put the proposition to him. I said films are risky but it was up to him. He told me he'd make up his mind when he talked to the girl. Apparently Linda and Kingbright were coming to see Disco that afternoon."

Merv went home and I followed Johnny upstairs. I didn't like the look in his eyes. We found Linda putting clothes in a bag. Johnny tossed the lid, turned her around, held her in both hands.

"I just heard for the first time that you were with Kingbright when he went to see Disco. You never told me you were there."

"Why should I?" She pulled away from him, went to the wall.

"Because Don Cleary said he took the gun from the Avenging Angel. Most people think of angels as women. That never occurred to me before now."

"If you think I killed those people, you're crazy," Linda said. But her liquid southern accent would not cover the lie.

Johnny said in a very quiet voice, "You've nothing to worry about. The case is closed. Cleary is dead and the cops have hung it on him. I just want to know what really happened. For my own satisfaction."

Linda looked at me. "I'll talk to you. But not with Dennis here."

Johnny nodded at me. I made my way down the iron steps. It can't have been more than a few minutes before I heard a muffled scream and a thud. Then I heard heavy footsteps, a slamming door and silence.

I ran upstairs. The apartment was empty. They had to be on the roof. I opened the service door and ran up the final flight and out onto the flat asphalt roof. Johnny was standing by the edge. Alone.

I walked to his side and looked down. Linda Lennox was lying in the stone-paved courtyard five floors below. I waited and then he started to tell me about it.

"She sent Kingbright away that afternoon because he was drunk and hyper. The gun was in her handbag. She laid the story of the film on Disco, poured her heart out to him. He not only refused to back the idea, he laughed at it. Said it sounded like kid stuff. Then he let her know he would be interested in her, but not as a writer. She took out the gun and threatened him. That was when the dog came at her and she shot it first. Disco tried to grab the gun and she shot him. Then when his wife and daughter came running, she had to kill them to protect herself."

I thought about this. "What about Cleary?"

"It was like he said. He came along just then and found Linda with the gun. She was dazed. He took it from her. Told her to go and sit no more. Then for some reason he put the bodies in the pool. Just to confuse the situation, I suppose."

Somebody had parked a car in the courtyard below us. He saw Linda's body, looked up at us on the roof, and went away running.

"Another thing," Johnny said. "She killed Kingbright, it wasn't suicide. He was getting set to talk about her being with him that afternoon. She used the sword to topple him out the window."

In the distance we heard a siren. "But why this ending?" I said.

"It was the only way. She said she'd never admit to the police what she'd told me. And she laughed in my face. I thought of poor Don with all that crazy guilt on his mind. And then I saw her skating out of here, clean." He stared at his right hand. "So I hit her and brought her up here."

What bothers me most about all this is that Johnny Fist now seems at peace with himself. And I am the one with the load of heavy information I have to live with. I'm sitting now in the club nursing a beer and the busy night life is going on as usual. Mervin Stein and Mitzi came in and are two stools down the bar from me, pretending to be okay. But I see the expression on Merv's face when he glances at me. He's heard about what has been logged as Linda's suicide leap and he recalls Johnny's harsh reaction when he talked about her that afternoon.

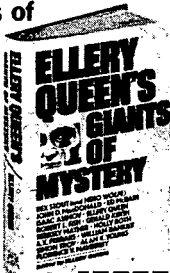
So what do I do? Do I go to the police? Do I swallow the whole thing, no matter how it poisons me? I just looked up and saw Johnny Fist watching me from the far end of the room. There is a little smile on his face, as if he knows me better than I know myself.

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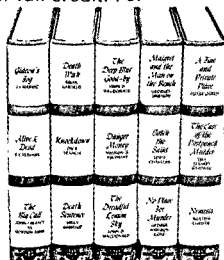
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